



University of Southern Maine
USM Digital Commons

Stonecoast MFA

Student Scholarship

Spring 2019

Time Away

Loren Hart Francis

University of Southern Maine, lorenfrancis@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/stonecoast>



Part of the [Nonfiction Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Hart Francis, Loren, "Time Away" (2019). *Stonecoast MFA*. 80.

<https://digitalcommons.usm.maine.edu/stonecoast/80>

This Open Access Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at USM Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Stonecoast MFA by an authorized administrator of USM Digital Commons. For more information, please contact jessica.c.hovey@maine.edu.

Time Away

A THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE

STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

BY

Loren Hart Francis

2018

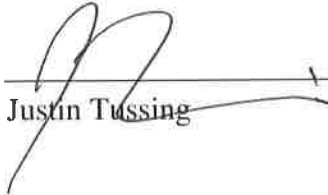
THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN MAINE
STONECOAST MFA IN CREATIVE WRITING

December 1, 2018

We hereby recommend that the thesis of Loren Hart Francis entitled *Time Away* be accepted as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Fine Arts



Suzanne Strempek Shea Advisor



Justin Tussing Reader



Justin Tussing Director

Accepted



Adam-Max Tuchinsky Dean, College of Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences

Abstract

Loren Francis planted himself squarely into his life in 2008, and looked around from there, trying to remember what the view was like from then: a time of building, music, creativity and expansiveness followed by an accident, panic attacks, and the deep rout of alcohol and drug addiction. He picks up the threads, tugging on them and letting them take him where they would back through his family tree to his Irish farmer grandparents on his mother's side, and his British and Lebanese grandparents on his father's. Music, addiction, family and entrepreneurism all play a salient part in his life in that year and before. He traces these themes from as close as is warranted to the present back through his childhood and that of his three brothers growing up as part of a back-to-the-lander-turned-Amway-seller family on the rugged coast of Maine—and back farther still, to his “Uncle Rat” the taxidermist and Eli Whitney, his grandmother's great-uncle.

Acknowledgements

My grandmother Lewella gave me a love of music, forced it on me actually, and I'm grateful for her in this. Music has kept my brain open to the world, and what better gift than that? My oldest brother Ernie tweaked that love with injections of compact disks in my formative teenage years: Jimi Hendrix "Experience," Rod Stewart, and Nirvana. My older brother Philip showed me the love of learning and academia, something that finally sunk into my dense and opaque skull at nineteen, when I followed in his track and started attending his alma mater. He laid down tracks, like a good older brother should. I didn't follow them all, and they were there as benchmarks, whether, at times, I liked it or not. Thanks. And my younger brother Chris, born two years after me, has forever given to me the confidence of being an older brother, a certain belief in myself borne of his believing in me, whether it was warranted or not. And more importantly in Chris, ("Stig" as I've always called him), I've been fortunate to learn what it is to really know someone, and to be known, in turn, by another.

Dr. Paul Borgman, in my early forays into higher education, implanted deeply into my head the love of literature, the magic of being a good reader. Suzanne Strempek Shea, for this project, leant her perfect blend of prodding and positivity without which I undoubtedly would have fallen short.

My parents have given me so much that it's impossible to parse it out from simply who I've become, and gratefulness is not a full enough word to express my attitude towards them.

My wife, Ida, has had to put up with me throughout this project, doing extra legwork with our toddler, and just simply being there when I'm struggling. Thank you. And that toddler, Pippi, has given me far more than she'll ever know, (until she has one of her own): a joy towards life to depths I'd never thought myself capable of.

There were many others along the way, and together they coalesce into a weight of positive effect on who I am and what I've been able to do. I am not just myself, but a collection of the forces that all of these people have acted upon me. And they all deserve as much credit as I do.

Table of Contents

Preface.....	1
Prologue: 2018	25
Chapter 1: Remembering	35
Chapter 2: The Peninsula	39
Chapter 3: Changing Your Mind.....	43
Chapter 4: Grandpa John.....	47
Chapter 5: Bleeding Heart.....	57
Chapter 6: Amway	59
Chapter 7: Temperment.....	65
Chapter 8: Finances.....	69
Chapter 9: Shards	73
Chapter 10: Crash Course	75
Chapter 11: Meetings	79
Chapter 12: Cheers.....	85
Chapter 13: Foundations	89
Chapter 14: The Brakeman	91
Chapter 15: Stonewalled	97
Chapter 16: Dynamite	99
Chapter 17: Amway Too.....	105
Chapter 18: Babysat	109
Chapter 19: Retrograde	113
Chapter 20: Abroad.....	117
Chapter 21: The Itch.....	123
Chapter 22: Morning Drink.....	129
Chapter 23: Powdery.....	133
Chapter 24: Cook It.....	137
Chapter 25: High Note	143
Chapter 26: Chemistry 101	147
Chapter 27: Awake.....	149
Bibliography.....	155

Preface

When I set out this past year to try to get some of my life down on paper, I didn't intend to explore memory. But I found it impossible to move beyond the first few lines without going there, memory being quite important to the task of memoir. And, unfortunately, mine has never been a very rich or detailed memory. I wondered if that was because I'd paid it so little attention over the years that it sort of buggered off and hung out in the corners of my life. I was sharp in school, but my memory was pin-point sharp rather than a blade of any considerable length. I remember a particular moment when I was learning the states and the capitals. I must've been ten or twelve. I went into my mind and put together blocks like Lincoln Logs, stacking phrases and names on top of one another to associate and give life to the dull names of cities like Lansing. I found I could memorize clearly and quickly with my new technique, but it was a shallow remembrance, surfacey and thin. In short time it would disappear into the web of my head, supplanted by newer experiences, or newer dumb facts.

As I grew older, this way of living and using my brain began to take shape and spread from the limits of classroom memorization. Speed over substance and thrift over patience. I identified early with the highs of accomplishment and multi-tasking. I'm sure the egg bore the chicken, as my synapses shifted their tact from the wonders of childhood beholding to adulthood calculation. The synapses were not helped, either, nor was my memory, by concussions along the way. It's actually quite surprising that the medical field didn't take concussions seriously until the last decade or so. They are, after all, a bruising and swelling in *the brain*.

My first memory of such an accident was in second or third grade. I'm sure, though, judging from my parents' description of the type of child I was ("always exploring," "adventurous,"—in other, less-motherly words, a pain in the ass), that the first concussion I remembered was not in fact the first. Trying to remember concussions has complications built into it. But this one was impactful enough, so to speak, that it stuck in my memory. I still have the yellowing, dead front right tooth to remind me of it every time I look in the mirror. I even remember the boy's name, Seth. He was handsome and petite, with grey penetrating eyes and wisps of combed-over brown hair. He was short, his forehead aligning perfectly with my front teeth. I can still picture his face, recreated or not, whipping around the boy who stood frozen (it was a game of freeze tag) in the field at my school. And then I had the strange sensation of regaining awareness in a place that was not where I was when I'd lost it. The gym teacher, Dawn Jordan, propped me up as we walked past the tennis courts and down the hill to the nurse's office. There was blood everywhere and a strange sensation in my gums. Something was not right. My front tooth was gone.

The tooth fairy wouldn't get this one. Instead, they had me put it in a cold glass of milk, and then later into my bloody mouth while we drove to the dentist for emergency surgery. Prefiguring my adult troubles with addiction, I remember very clearly all of the nitric oxide I was given during the many dentist visits. I could close my eyes and still be looking at the world. This world was darker and shadowy, but I could see shapes and almost create them by willing them to be. And I could follow my shapes off into the distance of this new space, I creating them, and they leading me. We had many great adventures, my shapes and me, while Dr. Vachon did his work.

I remember the contraption that our neighbor made for me, a ketchup bottle type of thing with a long plastic straw fitted through the cap that ran all the way to the bottom, and through which I could suck my meals—watered-down butternut squash mostly. The interesting thing about my memory, and perhaps memory in general, is that a few minutes ago, before I started writing these last paragraphs I wouldn't have been able to say that I remembered all of these details. But now I do. It feels almost like a battle with time that I'm mostly losing. But once I've sneaked behind the enemy lines, the strong initial bastions, I can reclaim some of the territory it has taken from me.

I think I've had five good concussions, but the nature of the subject makes such calculations difficult. I've found similar blockages in trying to explore my drug addiction. The last concussion I had (at least at this writing) was the most impactful, though one of the lesser in terms of brute force. I fell about twelve feet in 2008, while I was roofing. I've been a part-time builder for most of my life, having various businesses tucked in amongst my other creative ventures: music, travel, and Burning Man. Whenever I'm building a railing or other safety element on a project, I often think of how ironic it would be if I fell. It'd be like a climber falling from a rock face while pausing to tie themselves in. I remember thinking that I really shouldn't leave that staging plank so far out over the edge of the roofing bracket supporting it. The quote "Know thyself" came to my mind and knowing myself in that situation would have been to remember that when I'm working on anything, I tend to rush, rush, rush, without much regard for the process or the precariousness. Plus, I seem not to have been blessed with the evolutionary safety net of a healthy fear for heights. So when the course of roofing shingles I was laying down led me out beyond the pivot point of the staging plank, I followed obligingly. And then I

obeyed the unflinching dictates of gravity down to the accumulating junk pile of lumber and scraps below.

My mind has never been the same. This time, the bruises in my brain didn't really heal, or some path through which electrical impulses once flowed freely crimped and rerouted. And maybe some part of my memory was locked off in the rerouting, like a town through which a freeway no longer passes. So when the prospect arose of trying to get my memories down in the form of words for my final project in graduate school, I jumped at it. I'd never done this type of work before. It came about almost by accident about a year ago when, for my second semester in graduate school I set about to write explore poetry with Cate Marvin, my advisor, and a youthful, female poet of note. For one of my assignments Marvin had me work on a personal essay while also reading Mary Karr's memoir *The Liar's Club*. She liked at least one or two of the poems I submitted to her that semester, but she *really* liked my personal essay, and insisted that I follow that path in the coming semester. And I was intrigued by the prospect. Was my mind even capable of going back there and re-experiencing with any coherence events from the long-ago past, sometimes traumatic, and usually clouded by the haze of drug and alcohol abuse?

I wondered what I would learn about my brain along the way. My memory sometimes feels like many-doored hallways, grey and windowless. Would doors open if I just kept knocking long enough? Or is a memory's power determined by the attentiveness of the individual's experience at the time of its inception? If so, I might be screwed.

In my creative life I've found it rather easy to slip back into the emotional richness of my past experiences. This has helped along my journey as a writer. Poetry

seems to spring out of the emotional places in my memory, as does music and lyrics. And I don't find it particularly difficult, usually, to access that marrow. I draw from it with special tools that don't seem related to factual recall, tools that weren't dulled, somehow, by the knocks of life. As I've turned my creative aim towards memoir I've encountered some fresh challenges, ones that have forced me to reckon with memory, my own and the subject itself.

In my explorations in the last two semesters of graduate school, I've found that memory is, well, murky, and not just in my own case. In a recent academic paper, I probed the subject of memory, at first as a self-exploration, seeing what I could remember if I tried really hard. I came up with an effective technique for remembering, sort of by accident, by practicing how far back I could remember as I lay down for sleep. I would follow my mind attentively, as it worked its way through my life, earlier and earlier, until at last it rested on the first thing it remembered. And then I would let my mind stay there, allowing the memory to flesh out, become colored in rich in detail. The first night I did this, my mind went back to a memory about my grandfather which I wrote down first thing in the morning:

"I remembered sitting, likely fix or six years old, on a particular outcropping of rock, just high enough as to feel uncomfortable, and just enough like a nook to feel, somehow, extra protected and safe, like I was in a secret cave. The day was sunny. I remember squinting and poking my head out from the cliff just far enough to see my grandfather, some one hundred yards away, over by the small boatyard my father had started in the early seventies, some fifteen years before my memory. He was standing there in the dusty dirt near the launch ramp where the boats were hauled up on steel

cradle by large cables running up to an industrial winch in the shop. I was imagining that some day before too long he would die, and I was conjuring tears, real tears, and real sorrow in my fertile imagination.”

That particular memory became the beginning of my memoir work, a task which has carried me through to the present in which I’m writing. I’d never tried to write about myself in any factual or historical sense before, partly because I didn’t think my damaged mind would allow it. I started into the world of creative writing through the portal of music. For me, writing a good song requires a great emotional memory, but not necessarily a factual one. Whether I’ve trained my mind to remember emotionally or whether it naturally tends that way, I’m not sure. But, either way, when I’m writing music I mine my experience with the tools of emotion. I enter into my past through the feelings of what I’ve experienced. And I think I’m pretty good at it, “most of the time.”

“Most of the Time” is a Bob Dylan song from his 1989 album *Oh Mercy*, and any preface that is to lay the groundwork for my creative endeavors has to mention Dylan in its early paragraphs. No one has had such an impact on my creative work as he has, albeit from the distance of fan from star. I wouldn’t be able to count the times I’ve gotten goosebumps, those strange epicurean indicators of deep emotion, while listening to Dylan. So I’ve always wanted to try to reproduce those feelings in my work. Music has not only words to move with, but melody and instrumentation, vocal inflection and so on. It can be a perfect brew for conveying emotional information. And in that sense, it relies perhaps on a different kind of remembering than other forms of writing. It’s this type of remembering that I’ve practiced in my creative writing far more than others, be it from a natural inclination, or from an inability to succeed any other way.

But in my new venturing back through my life in my nightly memory exercises, I found that once I planted a flag securely back on a mountain top in the southwest Pacific of my past, many memories sprung up and spread out from it. But the course of my memory-led musings was not linearly moving forward from that particular memory of my grandfather. It spread from it in rich and unexpected ways, jumping around with just the faintest of links to the original memory. I went from that sunny day in my nook by the boatyard to a musing on his Arabian race, and what that must've meant to him and my English Protestant grandmother, marrying in the depths of the Great Depression. I moved to the difficulties of their early lives and the family histories, as best I knew them. I found that my mind wanted to keep going backwards rather than forwards, hopping along the lily pads as they emerged from the murk.

This led me into thinking more deeply about the workings of the mind and the memory. I've often noted that when I'm in the creative flow, particularly when writing song lyrics, (which I've been at now for over twenty years), that I can attain a spot where my mind flows with very little hesitancy between unrelated themes that are, somehow, actually related. In these times it's as if I've discovered a secret tunnel system in the brain, one that links up all the disparate subjects in there, and somehow brings them close together. And what's more, these connections, if written down and communicated, can be shared and related to by other humans with different brains! These experiences got me thinking more about the way the brain does this, the neural equivalent to the tunnel system. I didn't get into Freud in that particular exploration, but I wondered deeply about the subconscious, how it works, and, more importantly, techniques for getting it to work on command—to work for me in my artistic ventures.

Interestingly, that first night of my memory exercises, I remembered three dreams, and remembered them well into my waking hours. Not much of a feat for some, but I remember only two, maybe three dreams a year, and those are often weak and fade back off when sleep leaves me. But I can recall each of the three still now to this day, though they're not unique or interesting enough to recount here. What I'd discovered, in a novice sort of way, was a fundamental truth about the human brain: that it works associatively rather than linearly.

That may sound obvious to some, but it's really rather startling. Experience, life, runs always forward, the incessant march of time in which we exist. But it turns out that this is not how the human brain remembers, or even how it experiences life.

"Transience" is the term modern memory scientists use to describe a peculiarity of the mind's remembering. Generally speaking, the mind, over the course of time stretching out from an occurrence, sets aside or forgets the specific details of the given event, slowly, or sometimes quickly, grouping it with other similar events so it can, presumably, be more readily stored and remembered. This is depressing, thinking that our memories become, in effect, duller and duller over the years, more like everyone else's in our heads. But it's also interesting and almost hopeful, given that, perhaps only through transience – and through the arts - there is the possibility of deep, shared human experience. If artists are true to their own experiences there is a real potential for bridging the gaps between our individual lives, one that might not have been possible without the mind's tendency to generalize over time. As with many of those tendencies, there's both a downswing and an upswing.

This generalizing tendency of the mind, along with my own particular memory handicaps, blunted my enthusiasm for approaching such a task. But I found something of a way around the issue through my ability to latch onto memories emotionally, much like I had done with songwriting and poetry for most of my creative life. As happened with the memory of my grandfather, factual recall spread out from the emotional recall. It would be more accurate to say there was a give and take between the two: the emotional and the factual memory. And, it turns out, there is a positive aspect to the mind's generalizing, one that may aid in the forming of a story out of life.

The memory is sort of like a story-making machine, working in patterns and bouncing along thematic lines. The brain actually tends to favor forming themes, grouping similar memories, over the facts of what was actually experienced. So it became an interesting task, this trying to remember. Not only was I working against the concussive bruises, but I also had to consider transience, or just roll with it. Because it's not just the writer's brain that works in such a way that facts get set aside for the expedience of themes. The reader's brain also works this way, looking for patterns and clinging fiercely to them even against mounting evidence to the contrary.

I, and many other scholars before me, have always thought that Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" is a wonderful example of this tendency. Here's the poem in full.

The Road Not Taken

By Robert Frost

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,

And sorry I could not travel both

And be one traveler, long I stood

And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference. (37)

Most readers will take away from this poem the theme that there are many choices in life, and that most people take the easy path. But this poet was different: Frost dared to choose the path that, though it may have seemed more difficult, made him who he was—

“made all the difference.” In this take on the poem, it is a wonderfully thrifty condensation of many of the classic themes in the western canon, from Odysseus to the present, and a fine poem. But there’s a twist, one that makes the poem a great one, and unearths something essential to the human condition, the mind, memory and storytelling. It’s in damn plain sight, yet still so hard for the reader to see, and in this difficulty hides the real point of the poem. A large part of it is given to describing how the roads are, in fact, in no way discernible from one another. They are “as just as fair” as each other, “worn really about the same,” and “both that morning equally lay / In leaves no step had trodden black.” The interesting psychological twist is that, despite the evidence to the contrary, the reader, along with the traveler (sort of, we’ll see), by the time the famous last lines come along, easily sets aside the evidence to the contrary and concludes that the poem is an admonishment to forge ahead down your own path. Be an individual. Don’t be afraid to be different. In the end, looking back like the poet, you will be able to see with satisfaction how the choices you made that day made you who you are. The psychological tendency of the traveler (and, by extension, the reader) is to repeatedly seek ways to convince themselves that the roads are different, that one choice is distinct from the other, that we have agency over our destinies.

This poem blew open my mind when I studied it in college, because I, just like most other readers fell for the psychological trap. And once I’d gone back and read how much evidence Frost stacks against the conclusion I’d come to, I marveled at how easily I could set it aside in favor of the more heroic interpretation of the poem. It put in my head an important truth about the human brain, memory and writing: that we crave continuity, grouping things together into generalizations, forming patterns of thought into which we

can efficiently condense the massiveness of experience. In other words, our minds are tuned for survival, rather than to the reality of the world unfolding around us. This is, I think, a great lesson for writers, something to be keenly aware of when trying to capture experience in language that's shareable. It was certainly at the fore of my mind when I was navigating the pitfalls of memory and the peculiarities of the brain in approaching this memoir.

When asked about the most famous poem in the American canon, most people will say it's called "The Road Less Travelled," when in fact it's exactly the opposite: "The Road Not Taken." When I teach this poem in classes, I always save this last punch for the end, and the few students who really follow me flash smiles of delight at the wonder of how poetry works through the back doors of the human brain to reveal great truths. And it never fails to remind me to be skeptical of my own rote paths of thinking, especially when I'm trying to write the truths of my life.

So, for me, the obstacles to my writing a good memoir, especially an accurate one, are considerable. On the one hand, I have the concussions. There are swaths of my mind that used to be accessible to me that simply are no longer firing, or the paths to them have been closed off. I've even had the strange experience not so long ago or remembering that I used to remember something about my childhood that I no longer do. And then there's the transience. The idea that associations drive memory more than accuracy. Throw onto that the related and wonderfully illustrated idea in "The Road Not Taken" that humans have an inexorable tendency to want to see themselves as special, to elevate the choices they've made in life to seem more distinct and impactful than they

actually were. What we have in the human brain is the perfect recipe for a wayward recounting.

I've just finished a wonderful new book called *How To Change Your Mind*, by Michael Pollan. The book explores the history of psychedelics, laying out the provocative new scientific findings on the subject. Psychedelics, (not even known by this name at the time of their explosion onto America) were widely, though not universally, considered to be promising new therapeutic tools. Studies in America and Canada showed them to be effective in treating alcoholism, addiction, depression and so on. We all know the story that follows. The handsome and vocal Harvard professor Timothy Leary blew the whole thing out of the water when he declared that American youth should "Drop in, drop out, turn on." The boiling cultural revolution that ensued caught the attention of the powers that be, and the human tendency towards fear and an aversion to change did the rest. Psychedelics, legal up to that point, were swiftly outlawed, and nearly every research facility shuttered. But the times are changing once again: people are moving to the country like they did in the '70s, downsizing, buying yurts, and legal psychedelic research is happening in several prestigious institutions around the world, with promising, if preliminary, results.

This tangent into Pollan's book is worth following because his findings point towards some of the issues I encountered in trying to shift from poetry and music to memoir. More poignantly, I've had my fair share of encounters with psychedelics and other mind-bending substances, all of which have shaped some of how I've approached the subject of writing in the past, and how I'm trying to approach the task of writing about my life.

There's a small set of psychedelic research that is geared towards the possibility that psychedelics could help well people be better. Pollan spends considerable time on Robin Carhart-Harris, a researcher in England doing the most experimental laboratory work with psychedelics. He and his team have conducted extensive work studying the brain activity of people on psilocybin (the chemical derivative of "magic mushrooms"), and/or LSD. What they've found is that the brain under the influence of these chemicals is sending signals through a myriad of channels, making connections across its vast web in ways that it normally doesn't, at least in adulthood. Colors can be smelled, images seen floating in the sky. They mapped these connections, using magnetic imaging, and found striking similarities to the connective webs that are a part of the brains of children.

The child's brain, and the brain on psychedelics, (and the great writer's brain on psychedelics, I've come to believe), is alive with possibilities. A question or a problem, a new experience, has a vast number of possible solutions or outlets. The brain fires on all cylinders, so to speak, and this is both wonderful and very impractical for survival. As humans get to their mid-to-late twenties, scientist say, we develop what's called the "Default Mode Network," or DMN. This is the main regulating body of the brain - the council, so to speak. It accumulates experience and allows the brain to make quicker judgements effectively—generalizations, really, based on what has come before. A tree, a singular object in its own right, truly, each being completely unique, becomes grouped along with others in the brain into the category of tree. This is very effective evolutionarily because it allows the mind to focus on the task of survival more efficiently. But its downside, of course, is that as we get older it limits the sense of wonder that, as children, we exhibit towards the world. This mechanism is the culprit in the

misinterpretations of “The Road Not Taken.” We’ve encountered the literary trope of choosing the high and difficult road so many times in life and obliged our brains to consider our own journeys in the same way, that when we read the poem we easily glide over the contradictory details at its heart in favor of the comfortable interpretation. There is a poignant lesson in here to would-be writers of their own experience. And my recent forays into memory studies have helped me understand some of my adult struggles with keeping my creative edges sharp.

The default mode network is certainly linked to transience. Just like every tree is unique, every one of our experiences is different than any other. And yet, over time, for the sake of efficiency and the expediency of survival, the brain groups similar experiences together in its memory banks. Usually only the generalizations stick around, and the particularities fade.

So there are two related mental processes working against the memoirist. The DMN helps us (or hurts us) to “get used to it,” so that our brains aren’t overwhelmed by the sheer mass of sensual data available to it at any point in the day. And transience ensures that, over time, the “useless” details of experience fade into one another. Carhart-Harris, having a background in psychotherapy, is especially keen on forming links between Freud’s ego, and the DMN. Being the processor of incoming information, the DMN forms a sort of identity around which incoming information swirls, an identity that deepens and shapes itself over the course of a lifetime—not far off Freud’s conceptions of the ego, or the role of the poet/traveler looking back “with a sigh” in “The Road Not Taken.” It may in fact be in the DMN that our sense of self, our distinction from the

world around us and the others inhabiting it forms—a sort of evolutionary myth that gives us illusory, if necessary power.

And this makes sense for the survival of the human species. But not for the survival of the memoirist, or the betterment of art. Children have a much less formed sense of self, and so, too, the human on psychedelics—and, I wondered, if the same were true of the self I accessed in my dream-like memory exercises. One of the common experiences of people on psychedelics is a sense that we are all one, that everything is connected. The default mode network is bypassed, experience is given a richness, the brain fires diversely, sparking across regions that, as we age, become distinct from each other, lonely and miserly, rutted. This can lead to addiction and other mental challenges, but it also leads to rote and dulled memories, weaker and weaker vividness to draw upon in trying to capture experience in words. Again, it leads to the “sigh” and the rote, Hallmark closing of Frost’s poem.

Psychedelics can be one way to break through the ruts that form in the brain but seeing the world as a writer is another way, exploring the hidden tunnels. The brain can be exercised against transience, and the tyranny of the DMN. And there are other lapses in the DMN that can be exploited, holes through which the trained writer leaps, voluntarily and, sometimes, involuntarily. There is a classic case of what has come to be known as “Involuntary memory,” a term that Marcel Proust coined in his “Madeleine Moment.” It’s a famous nod to memory, one often noted in the first paragraphs of scientific studies. The distinction Proust made then between voluntary and involuntary memory has been more or less upheld and applied in modern memory studies. At the time of the incident, Proust was beginning his multi-volume memoir masterpiece

Remembrance of Things Past. No doubt, remembrance was much on his mind. He was having tea at a place of no consequence, and suddenly, as he dipped his biscuit (called a “Madeleine”), something in the act stimulated a deep memory. It was of his aunt, and when she used to serve him such biscuits. The street she lived in rose to his mind vividly, its walls and stones awash in the feeling of color. The smells of his childhood town welled up and he re-experienced it with an almost ineffable depth. He called this an “involuntary memory,” unhinged from time, coming unbidden, bearing the fruits of the senses of the original experience.

This scene and the accessing of “involuntary memories” became the theme of his *Remembrance of Things Past*. He opposed involuntary memory with the less vibrant form of remembering, “voluntary memory.” The latter memories, as conceived by Proust, are those that we consciously bring to mind through an act of will, (a certain date, who attended that dinner party, for example). This is the grid of the brain across which we can scan at any time, a type of mechanical retrieval mechanism in the mind—tarnished, as we know, by the whims of transience and the DMN.

Proust saw, especially in his autobiographical endeavor, that it was the more sensual form of remembering, involuntary memories, that the writer need attend to. It is within these memories that one can access the “essence of the past,” vibrant with loose associations, narratives, and sensual information, a sort of back door around the DMN.

For Proust, the involuntary recollection was the visceral type of remembering that swells out of our memory in more of a river than a grid, a touch of déjà vu perhaps, or a vivid sensual recall. For me this has always been most powerfully presented as when I smell dust rising up from an urban street, just after a light rain, usually, and I’m

transported back to the streets of Mexico City, in my ten-year-old body, kicking a soccer ball with some local kids, with a fast-warming glass bottle of Coca-Cola in my wet and dusty hand, a deep contentment.

Involuntary memory has been written about extensively, even carrying right on through as a thread in modern memory studies. There are fascinating connections between memory, (both the act of remembering, and the scientific process of it all), and art. Art is a sort of re-presentation of an aspect of life, and in order to get into that territory at all, one might argue, you have to begin by remembering—accessing experience effectively. This is what I was trying to do, in the most direct of ways, at the start of my memoir project: gather fodder for an artistic representation of my life.

The Greeks conceived of memory as a goddess, Mnemosyne. She was said to have slept with Zeus for nine nights in a row, each night conceiving one of the nine muses, the spiritual guides empowering artists in their quests. All artistic representations of life, from drama and sculpture to poetry and music, relied on the goddess of memory to empower the artist. In this Grecian mythical tradition, we find the roots of the notion that it is only in reincarnating the past that an artist is capable of accessing and transmuting the important stuff of life. The first act of making art then, is to remember, to access the mind's stored essence of life, truly, by the goddess's guiding hands. And, of course, in here, too, not deeply buried, is the link of stories and writing and memory.

In the myth of Mnemosyne there is a recognition of the almost transcendental feeling of the task of remembering. Even in the more scientific dealings with the brain and memory there arises language that tends towards the metaphysical, whether the researchers like it or not. As a musician and a poet, I certainly enjoy seeing scientists

forced to write poetically when describing what their studies of the brain reveal. One can't help but appreciate, even from our modern age, the aptness and the depth of the more mystical conceptions of memory and the arts. The psychedelic scientists that Pollan follows certainly grapple with the inevitability of the slippery language needed to effectively approach some of the subjects they're broaching in their research. But how else to approach it? It's one of the tantalizing features of this type of research: that it's so far out there, so limitless and open-ended, that spirituality naturally figures into it. Perhaps the Greeks were right to mythologize. It appears a bit naive from our modern vantage, but it's really befitting of the subject—giving it a fullness that it merits—a fullness that language can't get at directly. I'm reminded of the Emily Dickinson line, “Tell all the truth / But tell it slant.”

There is something to the adage that the more we learn the more we find we don't know, especially when it comes to the brain. This is the space where the arts slip in, where I want to be as a writer: bridging the gaps between science and life, and most importantly, the vast spaces between one human and another.

As I went about my writing, I did so with a certain trepidation, and a sense of wonder at the task ahead. And I found the journey of trying to remember to be as interesting as the task of writing. There was the increased dreaming, the transcendence of slipping back into past experiences, around the backside of the DMN, I fancied, the sensual type of recollection that Proust captured, right along with the very physiological limits of working with a damaged product. But what was my story?

The semantic link between the word “storing” and “story” is interesting. These words come, by means of Latin, from the Greek word for history, *historía*, which means

both a recounting, and a judging. If we think of writing and other forms of art as acts of representation (re-presentation), then the Greek myth of Mnemosyne, and the poets' invocation of her, starts to make vibrant sense. In this way of thinking about the act of writing, memory is the key to inspiration. Remembering becomes less a word that harkens towards factual recall, as towards a re-enlivening of the past. Story and memory become interwoven. And we store most effectively in the form of stories. For both better and worse, we live in story, and we recount in story.

Can I still have a good story if my storing capacity has been damaged? I guess you could say that I have a veritable trifecta of things working against me. There were concussions, there's the fact that I live most of my life in the "What's next" moment, which is really not a moment at all; and then, yeah, there's that little detail of heavy drug abuse, lasting right up through my late twenties, and (higher power and "One day at a time" willing), not beyond. The psychedelics I took may have had benefits for shaking some of the dust off of how I process information, but I have a suspicion that, all told, my drug abuse has done my memory no favors. So I decided to look the beast right in the teeth and start there. I set out to write about memory loss: concussions and anti-Ram Dass living, and drug abuse. I tried to have a space to land my memories onto, a ring to pitch my tents around, so I chose that last year, 2008, when I came to my highest highs and lowest lows. And from there I let my mind drift out. I let it wander its association pathways and tried to follow it faithfully. This wouldn't ensure validity but it might add an artistic credence to the project of storytelling. At least it added another layer to the whole project. I was trying to remember, after all, but also to track, with a scientific and

self-awareness, the paths my memory would take. And I wanted to get these down just as much as the story itself.

I wonder if the way we remember is a sort of package for experience, one that, if accurately tapped into, can be delivered to readers and listeners, finding its way into and in synch with their own neural pathways. If we are true to the workings of our own minds, does that make it all the more graspable for the audience? This might be something of what artists and writers feel when they're "in the zone." But surely not the entirety of the human audience is going to have memories that work along similar pathways in the mind. The science hasn't quite gotten there yet, but it will soon. In the meantime there's the Grecian myth...and a few wonderful theories coming out of the psychedelic researcher community.

Some of the researchers in Pollan's book describe the brain as a snow-capped mountain. Thoughts and experiences are like sledders going down it. The first sledder has free rein of the hill, welcome to go anywhere. The second, very much so also, but with a slight chance of getting caught in the ruts of the first sledder. But as the mind accumulates experience, there are more and more pathways established, each experience in turn more likely to follow in the tracks of the others—until very strong tendencies are formed, and the once blank and wide-open mountain slopes are deeply rutted, channeling all future sledders down tried and true (and sometimes destructive) routes. In the child, the tracks are light, and therefore the sleds tend to go in many different possible directions. In adults, the type of natural selection in the mind takes over and favors some paths over others very strongly. But adults on psychedelics display the sort of brain activity found in children, unrutted slopes. The brain web is immense and colorful. The

hope is that psychedelic assisted therapy can help depressed and addicted humans jump the tracks of destructive habit. I think poor writing might be just another form of a bad habit, and that we need Msenomyne's and our inner child's aid in breaking free of it—and, maybe, occasionally, some psychedelics.

Or maybe exposure to great writing and great art is the key. I wonder if the artist is playing the role of a type of modern shaman. Maybe a great artist is a bit like a mild psychedelic of the human brain. When we as writers are tuned into the finer, less-trodden connecting pathways in the brain, we can represent those for our audience, perhaps inspiring them to make those links themselves. When we look at the forms in, say, Picasso's greatest works, are we not loosening the DMN's grip on how it thinks reality should be? When we listen to Yo-Yo Ma's renditions of Bach's cello suites, perhaps we are relating to the fresh interpretations of reality written into them.

In this picture, a great artist is one who is tuned into the childlike or psychedelic-like openness and expansiveness in the brain. They keep the multitude of possibilities alive in their own minds and are therefore able to bring them to others. Maybe this is what many great artists are seen as quirky or eccentric. The DMN rules brains with a loose hand. This could also explain why so few artists are able to sustain the originality of their early works into later adulthood. I often think of musicians, and how few are able to do great work beyond their early twenties. This is about when the DMN stiffens and the ways we see the world harden into habit for most of us.

Bob Dylan is one of the exceptions, I've always thought, and this theory of artistry touched on above fits nicely into a cursory look into his life and art. Whether intentionally or not, Dylan has stayed weird from the start. He went from folk hero to

poetic rock and roller, and then, when the world caught up to him, he retreated to the hills of New York state, putting out a country album and changing his singing style. Then back to playing with The Band, odd and loose pieces, laced with the lyrics of inaccessible America. Then he emerged, already in his mid-thirties with his most personal and emotionally pungent work with “Blood on the Tracks,” only to follow it up with a violin-driven, Spanish western-tinged album called “Desire.” Again and again he shape-shifted, keeping his fans, and maybe his own sense of self, just off kilter enough to avoid the ruts on the snow-capped hills of the mind.

The point in this brief Dylan history is not only to indulge my eager fanhood, but to also show something about the creative, unregulated mind at work. Whether it’s intentional or not Dylan’s DMN is certainly not as active as it is in other human beings. And it’s not too far of a reach to think that this child-like or psychedelic-like state that Dylan has maintained in his mind somehow helps him to access the looser and richer connections between things that we find in his lyrics.

Conclusions in such a discussion may be disingenuous to the topic. But we have gone along a bit of a journey, a meandering path befitting to the subject at hand. There may be no conclusion to the stuff of memory and the mind, only a laying out of what we know so far. And once we know everything, there may in fact still be a circularity to whole enterprise of studying the brain’s workings; it is after all the brain with which we’re studying the brain. It may be that any conclusions we come to are tinged, stuck up in philosophical conundrum. What else should we expect when studying the tool with which we study?

At least for the purposes of this preface enough has been said to flesh out my approach in writing the memoir section of my thesis project. I've come to this process with a studied awareness of the intricacies of trying to approach it, let alone of actually putting the pen to paper. But rather than being stifled, caught up in the circularity of it all, I've found that an awareness of the process has added a deeper layer to the subject of my life. The process of remembering itself has become one of the themes. Unfortunately, my forays into psychedelics, many and varied, have never been guided, and they would certainly fall under the partying, free-fall variety, rather than the mystical. But I can see how they've affected me still to this day, many days, and almost ten years now sober. I can see a thread from those experiences, maybe even from childhood, weaving through to those times, when, perhaps just waking, not far from the ego-free dream state, I feel the flow of artistry within me. The brain is alive and open to the world of possibilities. The snow-capped mountain is fresh with clean powder, and my sled is sharp and carving this way and that, unencumbered by the trails it has taken before. And in those moments I can feel the divinity within me, the spark of the beyond. I hope and suspect that in those times I can create something that bridges the gaps that logic is loath to cross. And an even greater hope is that the audience, the reader or the listener, if I am faithful to the craft, is inspired to follow me along the daring paths I've cut across the snowy slopes.

Prologue: 2008

The first step is to remember, right? Whether it be 2008 or just yesterday? So, as I lay down for sleep one night this spring, 2018, I decided to let my head slipway into a particular memory, to grab hold of the small thing I remembered and to let my mind build a story of remembrance around it. I remembered sitting, likely fix or six years old, on a particular outcropping of rock, just high enough to feel uncomfortable, and just enough like a nook to feel, somehow, extra protected and safe. It was my secret cave in the sun. The day was bright and warm. I remember squinting and poking my head out from the cliff just far enough to see my grandfather, one hundred yards away, over by the small boatyard my father had started in the early seventies, some fifteen years before my memory. He was standing there in the dusty dirt near the launch ramp where the boats were hauled up on a steel cradle by large cables running up to an industrial winch in the shop. My young self was imagining that some day before too long, he would die, and my fertile imagination conjured tears, real tears, and real sorrow.

It's strange how the mind works. Though we experience life as it unfolds, within the scope of time, from front to back, the mind remembers associatively. It's more liable to leap from one experience to another thematically similar experience than it is to go in sequence from an event to whatever followed. After I recollected the memories of my grandfather, for instance, my mind didn't then draw up the memory of whatever I did next on that sunny day, but it bounced to thinking about my grandfather, and particularly his Lebanese immigrant family. How is that a mind which is part of a physical body bound within the flow of time, an inexorable arrow pointing towards the future,

remembers things thematically with little consideration for the temporal proximity of the memories? Where did this mind come from that's so untrue to life, to our existence within the bounds of time? Maybe the mind is like an eyeball. It picks up and processes certain frequencies within life experience, just as the human eye picks up only certain colors out of the multitudes that exist. And maybe the only problem with such a mind arises when we give to it a stature beyond what it lives up to. It's the best we've got after all—who could blame us for relying so heavily upon it? Our minds provide the only sense of self we'll ever have, an individuality we need to stay the encroachment of the vast subjectivity surrounding us. So the mind's rebuke against the flow of time could be seen as a survival mechanism like any other. By first fashioning, and later sticking within, certain thematic limits, the mind is better able to hold itself together. So it may come to be that the swirl of incoming sensory information slowly forms into a ball of ego. And this sphere becomes its own little center of the universe. The vastness of the earth and beyond, now swings circles around it, perfect circles, not ellipses, no, not ellipses.

What are we to do with this little bit of falsehood in our skulls? How is the memoirist to trust what comes out of it? "Going with the flow" is about as rich a bit of advice as I ever got, and maybe it applies here. The best I can hope for is that enough other hardened balls of ego around me have formed similarly enough to my own that they can come along for the ride of my mind. These are questions after all that could stun a would-be memoirist like myself, with a demon of cerebral paralysis waiting on my shoulder. But I realized as I let my mind have its way that night, leading me into the memories, that A) this mind was all I had, and B) that perhaps the only way to answer

such questions was to follow my mind and let it reveal what it would of itself along the way. I even fancied I could keep a slight distance, waiting in the shadows just behind it. That way I could both write what it was showing me and provide a commentary on how it was going about its work. I'm not entirely sure this is possible or even desirable, but I like the idea of it, a sort of meta layered exploration of my life, a self-experimentation in memoir form that bounces back and forth between the then and the now. I don't want to pretend that I am writing from any when but now, after all

But there was something else in this memory of my grandfather that eclipsed the rote factual side of it, and the questions that arose from it about my mind and memory. Emotion. In my bed that night, lying next to my wife, with our one year old daughter in the next room, I felt again the sadness my child self felt in that little rock nook just as real as I'd felt it then. It was like a portal back into the memory, one that was truer than whether I accurately recalled the day to be sunny or cloudy. The emotion rose up and shaded out the rest of the details, as if it alone wanted to be recalled truly. As I continued on my journey of recollection, I held this lesson close. Partly it was because I fancied that perhaps emotion is a sort of gateway back into past experience, one that penetrates where other modes of excavation cannot. And partly it was because I've never been particularly good at any other type of remembering. For reasons to be discussed my brain is a damaged good, capable, but not often living up to its potential. Throughout all of my mental ups and downs, though, I've never lost the potent sense of my emotional past, and the ability to draw from it. I've craved it and I've feared it both. But I'm committed to following it. Here's where it took me:

My grandfather was Arab, not that I knew that then. He was “Syrian,” I remember hearing him say when I was young, though I knew him to be from the country of Lebanon. I’d hear him exchange jokes and pleasantries in Arabic at the Bess Eaton donut shop downtown in Winsted, Connecticut, a small town tucked up in the hills of north west of the state. It was the town his family immigrated to, and in which my father grew up. It was pleasant when I was young, with small shops where locals came and went, not like the facsimiles we have now: “local” shops in revitalized downtowns where only the tourists go to see how it feels to be from there. But even this scenario would be preferable to the reality of what that little town looked like the last time I was there, about nine years ago now, ten years after my grandfather’s passing. It was rundown and haggard, not quite boarded-up buildings, but getting there. People passed each other unbidden on the sidewalks, and the church pews, I surmised, were all but empty on Sunday mornings. There was a strange sadness in seeing it like that, knowing that so much of my history was born out of the place.

I don’t remember my grandfather Phil’s “race” ever being mentioned in my family, or ever having even thought of it, until after he actually did die. He was ninety, in his home, in a hospital bed. I was an eighteen-year-old drug addict, prowling through his jewelry boxes and top drawers for things of value I could pawn. That didn’t seem so horribly wrong at the time. By then, my mind had rutted itself into the norms of addiction, the “poor me” narratives of the drug abuser. But staring back at it across twenty years of vast space, it’s hard not to cringe.

By the time I was born his hair had lost its Arabian black, and his skin was paler than it had been in his youth. To me he was just Grandpa, the grandpa who never failed to

take me and my three brothers out for Junior Whoppers at Burger King and, before or after, down to the toy store on the edge of town for pretty much whatever we wanted. I don't remember any of the toys in particular, but I do remember when I achieved the nearly impossible feat of exceeding his generosity with my greediness, and his rebuking me for wanting one too many toys.

I have a memory for such things as pain and embarrassment. I think it's tied to my experience with the poignancy of my emotional recollections. And maybe it says a lot about me, more than something about the happy conditions in which I was raised, that painful memories stick in my mind more than joyous ones. The persistent memory I have of my grandfather is of him in the last year of his life, not quite bedridden, but getting there. He shit his pants on the way to the bathroom, despite our best efforts at balancing the expediency of his need to get there with the desire to leave him a shred of self-respect. He took it all quietly and stoutly, without much outward anger. It was my first picture of a dying man, a first generation American.

So, my very white and British grandmother, Lewella Hart, had married an Arab. All I remember hearing of any resulting difficulties was the religious side of the scandal: my Protestant grandmother marrying a Catholic man. No matter, he converted over to the ways of the Winstead Methodist Church that her grandfather had helped to build, and in which she would lead the choir that included Phil's baritone for some fifty years. And maybe she was less picky by the time she met him, having already married and divorced a Jewish man from Baltimore around 1930. Divorce was a scandal back then, and "Grandma," as I knew her by, recounted to me on more than one occasion the reaction of her Uncle Doug to her proposed first marriage: "Imagine, bringing the name Goldberg

into the Hart family!” Ah, so this remembering is revealing the truth of some good old anti-Semitism in my roots, “good old” being the key phrase, like back when it somehow seemed to have less sting in it. Or did it? Maybe race was a heavier thing back then, but also lighter? I’m not sure how that worked, but I recall my grandfather using racial jabs on his Italian friends, and their returning the barbs. I remember him recounting to me what his half-Italian half-Jewish friend used to say to him: “Yeah, it was tough being half and half. I never knew whether to just steal something or to try to get a better deal on it.”

Even quoting such a line seems a bit touchy today, and I find myself cringing as I write. But back then there were more tightly bound communities, all mixed together - at least in that little corner of Northwestern Connecticut. There was Bruno the Italian butcher, and Pele the Portuguese plasterer, and so on. And they didn’t seem ashamed of what we would think of as racist or culturally insensitive slang, even saying it to each other’s faces. Somehow, it was OK. Yet the racism of that time was of an even deeper variety, more profound and more of an accepted way of conceiving of the differences between the peoples of the earth. After all, it was a time when “colored people,” as I remembered my grandfather saying, were still far from equal citizens in the south. Maybe the one thing missing was the strong force of political correctness we have now, that on its dark side, adds layers of sensitivity, touchiness, and even backlash to racial issues. Maybe it was not so interesting as I’m thinking it to be. They were all white, after all, and at least of the similar Judeo-Christian ilk.

Whether my grandmother’s profoundly British family was OK with the Arab counterpart of my grandfather or not, I never recall hearing. They were probably happy (at that time period anyway) that my grandmother, in her thirties and divorced when she

met my grandfather, had the option to marry anyone at all. And I don't get the impression that she cared much to listen to what her elders had to tell her. She certainly didn't listen to Uncle Doug's anti-Semitic cautions—for the worse, apparently. And I'm sure the hasty decline of her first marriage further entrenched his opinion of Jews.

Lewella seemed to do what she wanted, for good or ill, an early-20th-century version of a rebel woman. She did end up a member of the Communist party after all, joining in Brooklyn, in the roaring '20's—and after the market crash, as the head of the Torrington, Connecticut, social work department, the next town over from Winsted. That's where my grandparents met, when my Lebanese great-grandfather brought his son Phil there for a job interview. My grandmother would recall with a laugh that my great-grandfather never let Phil say a word about himself, even though it was his own job interview. I guess he didn't want him to botch the interview, it being the Great depression, and jobs scarce.

At that point my grandfather would've been in his mid to late 20s. After Phil died, my grandmother told me he'd almost married seven or eight years before they'd met, to a Lebanese girl. She had developed some form of consumption, though, and became increasingly unwell, dying sometime in 1928. They were engaged to be married. At the funeral for my grandfather's fiancé, his mother had a stroke and died. Within that same six-month stretch, the market crashed and he lost his restaurant. I think of this when I need to put my problems into perspective. Somehow, the familial proximity makes his troubles more poignant life lessons than those of starving children halfway across the world.

My grandmother's story has plenty of tragedy in it, too, right from the start. Her mother was a twin. My grandmother was brewing in the womb when her father Lewellyn Hart went on a business trip down the east coast selling casket hardware, which was the Hart family business. Yes, a gloomy set up for a story already. He contracted typhoid fever and died on a train on his way back home. The pictures of him on his high school wrestling team, circa 1900, show a strong man with huge ears and broad shoulders. Looking at high schoolers can have us remarking on how young they looked. But looking at this picture of my grandfather was nothing like that. The young men on the team appear strong and old. I guess that back during a time when life was usually over and done with after forty years, one had to get grow up fast. He was dead ten years later, at the age of twenty-eight, on a train, never having met his daughter-to-be, my grandmother. So Lewellyn became Lewella.

What do I know of him? And will I be able to stop myself from tripping backwards in my history, all the way back to Adam? I could keep going back one generation. My grandmother often recited stories and names from her family tree. I'm not sure it would be helpful, though my grandmother's "Uncle Rat," the taxidermist, seemed like quite the character. Lewellyn was a wrestler, apparently. Other than that, he seemed to be able to play any instrument he chose. I know he was in a brass band, that he sang in a quartet, that he played mandolin and banjo and guitar, and violin. I recently acquired his guitar and banjo and had them both restored. When I play his guitar and feel the aged wood on my fingers, the creaking tuning pegs, the power of music brings a little bit of Lewellyn back to me, I fancy. And in these times I like to feel the weight history.

So my great-grandmother, with plenty of help from her old maid twin I'm sure, raised my grandmother. Lewella had an unmatched memory. She seemingly never forgot anything, even into her one hundred and first year. She was also musical like the father she never met, directing choir and playing the organ at the Winsted Methodist Church for good lord knows how many years. She was also a poet, even publishing a book of verse (*Golden Pebbles*) in her nineties. She had an encyclopedic knowledge of her own life, such was her respect for history and her subtle passion for posterity. Passion seems too fickle a word, really, for my grandmother's wisdom and genius were expressed more thoroughly than that, more dutifully. She catalogued family history. She had binders full of pictures, all with notes and dates and names scribbled in her sloppy cursive. I remember a series of pictures in particular that we dug out after she had passed. It was from the late 1800's, of a family stoically posed, as usual for that time, in a small grassy area in front of a large white farmhouse. The unusual thing was that there was a great blue heron standing amongst them, and on the porch, a black bird of some sort. In the next photo the blue heron had changed positions, and there was a man with a hat on resting his hand on the bird's head. On the back of the photo, in sloppy cursive: "Uncle Rat (Rastmus), the taxidermist, with Family." It's good to know that though that generation of Americans always appears stoic in photos, they really did have a sense of humor.

Lewella knew the stories behind every keepsake. In each desk draw and every small carved box there were tags with descriptions of what she knew about them, from what relative she acquired them from and what year. She didn't do it as a discipline, or a New Years' resolution, but as an act expressive of who she was - of her just living. Of

course she tended the gardens and kept track of the best seed lines. Of course she handwrote five letters a day, gave bountifully to the Audubon Society, and was involved in the Winchester historical society. It was her way of being, without the goal of excellence at any one thing. I have the feeling this richness of living was part of the key to her remembering everything. Memory may be a product of living well, rather than a product of a genius, though I think my grandmother had a touch of that, too.

Though I have a full and rich life, I have sparse memories of it. I suspect the reason is because I rush through it, on to the next big thing and so on, to the last big thing. And I'm afraid there will come a point when the next big thing will be smaller than the last, until I'm old and sad and left without the crutch of the future to lean on. I don't want to find then that I have no past to lean on, either. So I'm looking at my life, and back at my grandmother's and beyond, in order to recover from it some lessons, before it's too far past. I'd like to live a life I remember.

Chapter 1: Remembering

Scientifically, the study of memory had a late start. The inaccessibility of the mind was a bane to scientific inquiry. The Greeks of course conceived of memory as a goddess: Mnemosyne. She was supposed to have slept with Zeus for seven nights in a row, each night conceiving one of the seven muses. I like this idea of the connection between memory and the arts, especially as I approach issues involved with recounting my life. Art is a sort of re-presenting of something that has come before, after all, and so it begins as a relationship with the past. I also appreciate the mystical and mythical approach to understanding the memory. Even now in the 21st century any assertion about the brain has to be coupled with an admission of ineffability. Sometimes a mythical broaching of a subject can be more enlightening than a dry scientific one, much like a poem about heartbreak can sometimes achieve more than an essay. But there are a few fascinating scientific findings about the brain that are worth exploring, even if they only take us so far, for now.

German scientist Hermann Ebbinghaus is largely cited as the first pioneer in the field of memory studies. In the late 1800s, he did a study on himself, flawed but enriching, during which he created and memorized nonsensical syllabic combinations, and then tested his recall over a period of years. By this means, he laid some of the groundwork for latter memory studies and introduced the enduring concepts of the “forgetting curve” (the pace at which forgetting takes place) and the “spacing effect” (that we remember better when study is spread out over time, as opposed to crammed—college students take note!).

Prefiguring Proust, Ebbinghaus wrote about the apparent spontaneity with which events, sometimes long past, spring to mind with great report. And even nodding towards the mystical, he notes that it is hard to understand the relationship of the “then” with the re-experiencing of it in the “now.” This is perhaps something similar to the experience I had in my bed that night with the penetrating emotion of the memory muddying the sense of the temporal distance from it. Ebbinghaus also questioned the validity of the idea that these flashes of remembrance were totally random, noting that they are perhaps linked to our current mental state, one image or sensation begetting an earlier form of a similar image or sensation. As I’m journeying back into my own life, I have developed a love/hate relationship with the idea that who I am now informs who I was back then. It’s annoying, and problematic for the memoirist, in that the current version of me is undoubtedly imposing themes and colors onto the back-then me. Conversely, it’s enriching in that there is a continuity between who I was back then and who I am now, a historical relationship between my selves.

Ebbinghaus’ “forgetting curve,” the general plotting of the human mind’s memory trajectory over time, is interesting in how it relates to any memoir project. I like to think of mine as uniquely pitched, given my history of drug abuse and concussions. But even for the best of minds the forgetting curve, Ebbinghaus found, drops off swiftly from the time of the event through the first twenty minutes or so. It slows only slightly through the first hour, then stabilizes dramatically over the course of the next year—and more or less, continues at a slight level of decline in the ensuing years. Little by little the mind forgets specific details of any given event. Instead of accuracy and specificity it favors grouping experiences with other similar events so they can be more readily stored

and remembered. The brain doesn't need all of the extraneous details of an experience to learn something valuable from it for survival. In fact, if the mind tried to process and store all of the sensory data available to it at any given moment it would surely burn out. This is depressing, thinking that our memories become, in effect, duller and duller over the years, more like everyone else's. But it's also interesting and almost hopeful given that perhaps through the same mechanisms of transience there is the possibility of shared human experience through the arts. If artists are true to their own lives there is a real potential for bridging the gaps between our individual experiences, one that might not have been possible without the mind's tendency to generalize over time.

The specificity of my attempted recollection gives it nuance and proximity to life, but perhaps there is a line somewhere between subjectivity and universality, one that the memoirist need be attuned to. An awareness of the generalities the mind bulks experience into may help massage the barrier between writer and reader, make it that much more permeable and porous. That's at least part of the point in writing, my writing: to get across that barrier, probe its weaknesses, try to share with others what is possible to share.

Lewella's was a poetic life, engaged and full, and simple, and as long as Lewellyn's was short. It was filled with gardening and music and 4 am writing sessions in her ledger, or on scraps of paper. She never travelled, except to and from our little homestead in Maine, some five hours from their corner of Connecticut. Life was simpler back then, and not "back then" in the bullshit way that it's usually used (like to impress some sort of lost ideal upon our childhood to account for the failures of the present generation). It actually was simpler, and my grandmother lived a simple version even of

it. There were no cell phones, no home computers, less stuff vying for one's attention. Maybe simpler is not the word. Maybe it was smaller. The world was smaller back then. Simpler implies a black and white world, like the old photos. But of course the human condition has been alive and well for millennia, rich with existential import for even the simplest of human lives. And there's nothing simple about any life.

Smaller, yes. One lived and died within a fairly tight radius of the town one was born in, just like my grandparents. And maybe that had a helpful side to it. Maybe there was less distraction from what one was doing at any time. And wouldn't this help in the act of remembering? There's got to be something to it, and this writing project is a sort of explanation of that idea. I want to, you could say, spend more time in the garden.

I'm more a builder of gardens and stone walls to contain them, though I think I'd rather be, like my grandmother, a tender of gardens, a weeder, and a thinner. I want to remember. I want how much I remember to be a reflection upon how well I lived my life. Right now, I'm scoring a D at best, though on Instagram and Facebook my life looks A. I've built treehouses, and I live in restored vintage campers. But there's a certain lurking evolutionary bug that drives me onward to create these things, onward and onward rather than inward and peaceful—the next rather than the now. I'd like to remember my life, at least, so when I'm old and senile and have forgotten everything anyway, I'll have this writing to look back on, or to have some great granddaughter read it to me by my deathbed. And she'll know that I did remember, at least once upon a time.

Chapter 2: The Peninsula

In childhood, I visited that little stone perch often, probably because of that very balance of feeling, exposed but safe. Being a middle child, maybe I needed a little extra something that the outcropping's nook gave me. In this memory, my father must've been just out of my vision, somewhere to either side of my grandfather, in the boat shop itself, or down near the water handling a boat. My memory left quickly from him to the thought of how much he worked, and whether I saw him much as a youngster. I must have, for the long hours he put in were right there, only about twenty yards from our little house. Just before I was born, in fact, the shop was in the back half of the house. Talk about integration of home and work life.

My parents bought their fifty-five-acre peninsula dreamland in Georgetown, Maine in the midst of the '70s back-to-the-land movement. There was a certain brewing disaffection with the urban hippy movement, and what better outlet for the ideals of simplicity and love than in the country? Hippies everywhere across America traded their bell bottoms for slightly slimmer dungarees, ones that wouldn't get snagged in the rakes and shovels they'd use to transform the earth. Were my parents hippies? I guess I'd have to say yes, looking at the pictures and hearing the stories. My father, just graduating from Springfield College in the summer of '67, hitchhiked across the country to San Francisco to see what the "Summer of Love" was all about. He was at Haight-Ashbury, and must've tasted the luscious fruits of those times, but I've never gotten him to expound any details from that trip. I'm sure there were plenty of note, perhaps not ones he'd like to share with his sons.

My mother had a five-year-old at that point, so I'm sure her embracing the hippy movements at hand were tempered, and probably for the better. And anyway, I get the impression, knowing a bit of what they are like now, that neither of them made particularly good hippies. But particularly good hippies, perpetually going with the flow, didn't make good back-to-the-landers, as most of them found out. The hard work that made my parents bad hippies made them great back-to-the-landers.

In pictures of my father at the time, the distinguishing feature beyond his large, light-brown beard is his muscle mass. My mother matched his muscles with determination. Seeing how much of it she still has now, in her early seventies, it's not hard to infer how present it must've been in her youth. And they needed it. The land they bought was almost entirely untamed, save for a road that stretched part of the way down it. And winter is never too far away in Maine. They needed shelter and food, the taken-for-granted necessities of urban life given new urgency in the country.

Coastal Maine is mostly ledge. Dig down a couple feet in pretty much any given spot and you'll hit the granite that likely dulled many a shovel my parents brought against it. Soil and compost had to be brought in to plant the gardens, the fruit trees, and the flower beds. At least the ledge being close to the surface made hand digging out the foundation for the house a little easier on my father's back.

My outcropping nook was eighty yards from where the first house stood on a granite perch above the water, near the "ruins" as we called them: stacks of granite stone cemented into partial walls, the beginning of a stone house, started and then stopped. The house where we grew up was originally half boat shop, half home, not a good combination. Each Christmas brought some improvement: a teak built-in, wall-to-wall

carpet, a ceiling rather than just the underside of the second story's planked floors. The building never quite shook its hodge podge nature, no matter the improvement. Upstairs were two bedrooms, originally: my oldest brother Ernie's, and my parents'. Eventually it became three. Kind of. The next in line, Philip, slept at the top of the stairs, basically an extended landing from which one could go right, through the plywood bi-fold door (ducking left to avoid the ceiling), into my parent's room, or left through the plywood bi-fold door (ducking right to avoid the ceiling) into what would become the shared bedroom of boys number three and four, Chris and I.

The house had the feeling of forever being temporary—lived in until the dream house could be built. There was always a model of the dream house sitting somewhere in the real house. The first was made of dark cardboard stuck together with a hot glue gun and built on a quarter-inch piece of plywood, about two by two feet. Little by little that fell apart and was placed in storage. Next came a series of sticks glued into a beautiful skeleton of a house on top of another piece of quarter-inch plywood, about two by two feet. They must have built them after we'd gone to sleep, the time for dreaming, because I don't recall seeing them being made. They were just there, reminders of dreams to be worked for and fulfilled. There were always pictures hanging on the refrigerator of beautiful homes or luxurious items. Our refrigerator was old and yellowing, sitting on a rolled linoleum floor stuck onto the slab of concrete my dad had dug and poured. I remember one picture stuck to our bathroom mirror of a Mercedes Benz. It was the most incredible car I'd ever seen: a silver sedan pictured against a vibrant desert gloaming. For me that picture of that car held a dream in it that things would be better sometime soon, richer, with four wheelers for us boys to drive around, and horses for my mother to ride.

My father actually started building their dream house just two years before I was born in 1980. It was built into the very cliff where my nook was. The walls were made of silver granite stone and mortar, some finished, some left ridged and diagonally stuttered towards the sky, inviting us to climb. The cliff the house was built into rose nearly straight from the water, twenty feet high or so, a bulging mass of granite with lichen and tough cliff grasses growing on it. But there was an accident that stopped the stone house project in its tracks, (a bit unlucky, but really just the byproduct of trying to do everything oneself), and for my childhood, my whole young life actually, it looked like the ruins of a castle. I'll come back to the accident soon.

One of my father's great strengths is his unfailing ability to underestimate the difficulty of the tasks before him--and this coupled with an unflinching belief in his own abilities. So it was that when he decided to build a stone house he and a worker went up camping in a quarry in Northern Maine and hand selected every stone he would need to build his not-small house. Then he set about mixing concrete in his small electric mixer, shoveling it in by hand out of piles of sand, cement and stone. Then the cement was dumped into a wheelbarrow, wheeled up to the plywood forms he'd built and placed himself. The granite blocks and slices of urethane insulation were placed into the forms and back-filled with cement, and then again, and then again, a feat of physical endurance that still baffles me to consider.

I can infer, in looking back, that my mother must've matched his feats of physical strength in her child-rearing and tending to the gardens. Anyone who has endured the early years of raising a child can attest to the similarity it bears to lifting small granite blocks over and over, and mixing vast quantities of porridge, like concrete.

Chapter 3: Changing Your Mind

It seems that remembering takes a little practice. All of these thoughts came back into my head as it learned to swim through the memory, the one that started with my little nook and looking out from it at Grandpa Phil. I started to see under the water of years of time. I remembered the details of the day, the sun and the feeling of squinting and sweat. I remembered the feelings of the prickly lichen on my hands as I gripped the granite and peeked around the edge to view my grandfather. The details were there, but they'd been hidden from me, maybe because I never looked.

But just as likely the brain was up to its tricks again. Related to how it's likely to remember thematically rather than temporally, the brain tends to group things together, to fill in the blanks even disingenuously, to make sense of a given experience or memory. The mind wants to see things as black and white, we could say, clear rights and wrongs, safe and unsafe. Again, we are largely a product of what's kept us alive these millions of years. Nuance and subtlety are not the highest priorities when it comes to avoiding cheetahs. Snappy judgements and distinct trains of thought are evolutionarily favored over rumination.

As I'm writing I can feel the pressure of themes, ones that continually pop up in my mind trying to tell me what my story is about. I have mixed feeling about them. They are a sort of blue print of the mind trying to dictate how I build my story. On the one hand I want to break out of them and let my story be as big and unbounded as it really is. My life isn't consistent, nor are the characters within it. But on the other hand I've come to learn some of how the mind works, the theme-seeking, the generalizing that it craves to help make sense of the otherwise ineffable bulk of life. And I'm hoping that in keeping

this academic and distanced look at my own mind interwoven in with the story of my life I'm able to both work within the power of generalized themes and the poignancy of subjective experience.

For my birthday this year, 2018, knowing that I'd been grappling with questions of the mind and story, my wife purchased for me Michael Pollan's new book, *How to Change Your Mind*. It's an exploration about what the history of psychedelics and modern psychedelic studies tells us about our minds. Scientists discovered in 2011 what came to be called the "default mode network," or DMN, a collection of areas in the brain that acts as a regulator for incoming information, sensory and otherwise. It's easy to see the necessity of such a cranial mechanism if we pause to consider the amount of information coming into the brain at any one time. As I write, the birds are chirping at the sunrise outside my window. There's a hum from the refrigerator. The colors of the new day are taking shape in the sunlight. There's an unfortunate waft of the dead mouse from under the kitchen cabinets that the dried eucalyptus my wife placed there is trying to contain and surmount. My elbow is pressed against the table and my fingers, speedily, and sometimes numbly, *thwack* away at the keys of the computer. Most of this information is useless to me for survival and, were it all to come rushing into the brain, it would burst from the pressure like unregulated air into the lungs of a diver.

And so this DMN is a sort of gatekeeper to the mind, letting in what is expedient for the tasks at hand, and, for the most part, keeping out what's not. What's interesting is that in children, and adult on psychedelics, the activity in the DMN is greatly limited. Carhart-Harris, one of the premiere psychedelic researchers from Europe has found that in humans with problems of addiction or depression, the DMN is particularly active,

taking in-coming information and condensing it into well-worn, and in this case unhelpful bundles that reinforce destructive patterns. The theory is that the DMN limits the possibilities of experience into rote and harmful patterns, and that psychedelics may be one of the keys to breaking out of those patterns.

Indeed, there is something sad about the fact that the brain, for all its capabilities, dumbs the colors of experience. When I dig into a memory, as I've been doing in this writing, the mind is at work trying to make sense of what I'm thinking. It pulls from similar experiences and makes something cohesive. Cohesiveness is great, but it's not usually true to the reality swirling around us at all times. But then again, as a writer, there may be something to the task of following the brain on its associative journeying. As in a good metaphor or simile, bouncing from one thing to another like thing can be enlivening, a wonderful tool for description. And the audience, after all, is likely to be human, it's safe to assume, and not reality itself. And for most of that human audience the associative writing will fit nicely into the workings of their own mind as they're reading. So it all works out, we hope.

That first night of active remembering, when the images of my grandfather formed, and my mind spread out from there, I had two dreams. Nothing remarkable there except that I never remember dreams. They say one has perhaps hundreds in a night, wild scapes of consciousness parading freely across the unfettered and un-barbed territory of the sleeping mind. But I remember maybe one dream a year, and the cliché applies: it's been that way as long as I can remember (which, again, isn't very long). But this night, after my bedtime memory exercise, I remembered two. The content of them may be inconsequential, but the fact that I remembered them certainly is not. It was as I'd hoped:

remembering led to more remembering. A small-time localized victory. But I have the suspicion that the larger triumph of living a memorable life might lay ahead somewhere down the path of simple, mindful remembering. And that the key to what lays ahead, lies behind, in memory.

Chapter 4: Grandpa John

I've always equated the lack of dreaming with the lack of remembering: as the product of fast and forward-facing living, with little time for reflection. (Sure, I do yoga, but it's mainly to keep me from falling off the edge, rather than centered and still, in the present). But this morning, after my memory exercise, I remembered those two dreams. And I can still recount them now, several months later: One was of the father of a childhood friend. I was an adult meeting with this man at the house at which his son Patrick and I used to play. Except now the yard was an apartment complex, inexplicably complete with a marina where there was no water. I won't try to dig up any meaning there, as that's not the point.

The second dream was of my brother, Philip, and his wife, Marsha. I saw land stretching out, with beautiful forests of pine and young moosewood, beds of pine needles and a small field beyond. We were trying to figure out how to drill a well for their new house. Somehow in the process of either exploring or of beginning to drill, I toppled a huge electrical tower, one that looked just like the ones near the tiny, alternative, private Christian school I attended for most of my youth. As you can tell, I'm not known for my dreams. I'm not sure if even Biblical Joseph could get meaning from them. The point is that I remembered them! Two of them.

Using chronology to explore one's life can end up boring the hell out of one's readers. Yet I've chanced that a little bit by working steadily backwards. The way to write, they say, is by the dictates of theme. Some memories, at first appearing memorable, are perhaps just inadvertent flashes and bangs in the background to the real

“story” of one’s life. Explosions maybe, but of a different color than the thread. How does one choose a thread? And is one needed? With all of its wild and unwieldy narratives, maybe life doesn’t want a thread.

But who cares what life wants; it’s the human who wants the thread, and this writing is a human endeavor. I thought that 2008 would be the right place to start. It was a big year for me, the first in which I identified that I had a memory problem, if not actually the year when it began. By that time, concussions and drug abuse, and probably my fast-forward way of living, had begun to have their effects on my memory. The year 2008, my 29th on this little glob of blue poo spinning in the dark matter of the universe, began with me flying high. I’d moved back from Boston to my parents’ house to work on a six- month investment scheme my entrepreneurial mother had kicked up some months before.

The spirit of business and industry ran hard in her Irish roots. Around 1920 her father John had moved across the Atlantic at seventeen and in with his second cousins, small-time farmers outside of Boston. He carried a small bag holding little more than an inscribed family Bible. He’d never see his sister or his mother again. They died shortly after, and his father had died before he left. That was the way of life in rural Ireland at the time, death and immigration.

I visited and slept in the cottage in which he was born on a family trip there in 2012. It was in the Northwest of Ireland, the town of Ardara. The cottage overlooked a bare hill of bog and weeds, crags sticking out here and there as the hill receded off from the cottage and down towards the ocean. The house was white stucco over stone with glossy red doors and windows sills. Everything was more or less the way it was when he

moved from there: two stoves that burned dried peat, dank floors and dark rooms. My mother's first cousin Jimmy still owns the house and lives nearby. He told us that my grandfather's mother had her last and seventh child at 52 years of age. She didn't even realize she was pregnant until eight months in. To me this says so much about that time and that way of life, where my grandfather came from, things I've struggled to capture directly with words.

Over the years in Lexington, Massachusetts John farmed and saved and invested in greenhouses with his cousins. Their greenhouses were real glass, and as long as football fields. Furnaces warmed them on cold evenings. My grandmother May, John's wife, recalled that there was always a "furnace man," usually a drunk or itinerant type who would sleep in the greenhouses and tend the fires in the nights. I imagine he'd know when the temperature would drop by the shiver-inducing cold. I'm not certain if this meant he wasn't allowed to drink whiskey on the job. Either way, I'm sure the family went through quite a few furnace men. May used to repeat a story about one of them stopping in for breakfast at her mother's house. May's mother asked the man how he liked his egg. He replied: "Says I, with another!"

My grandfather and his cousins grew celery for the people of Boston. Back then green celery was considered inedible by all but the poorest people. They would keep the crop from the sunlight until it went to market so that it maintained its white stalkiness. Some of these things from the past are hard to imagine.

After establishing the greenhouse business John made a few smart land purchases around the time of World War II and my mother's birth. He would've been considered well-to-do, prodigious and hard-working, though my mother says he once quit smoking

in order to save the few pennies a day he'd spend on tobacco for a farm expansion project, long before smoking became expensive. Apparently, he wasn't cheap, though. He was a practitioner of the "do it right the first time" principle. In 1944 my grandparents bought a cottage on a lake in New Hampshire and had a large cement boathouse built into the slope. The walls were five feet thick at the base, and untold yards of concrete and sweat were poured into them. But when the forms were removed, the integrity of the mix seemed too light and the work sloppy. He had the entire thing broken apart and started again. My parents now own that house and the shore is lined with cement and stone chunks from that first attempt, slowly eroding at the water's gentle and persistent waving.

He and May once donated thirty thousand dollars to build a steeple on the Episcopal church they both attended in Lexington, and donated land nearby for use as a park. But for all my grandfather John's hard work and smart land purchases, his health wouldn't sustain him. His blood pressure rose steadily into his adulthood and he died at fifty-five, leaving my mother, age 10, and her brothers, Jimmy, 15, and Billy, 16.

His thread of entrepreneurship sprouted and forked through my mother and into my three brothers and me. Seeing my father's stubborn individualism though, one might assume that more than fifty percent of it came through his lineage.

It was my mother's idea to build another rental cottage on their land that bought me north that year, 2008, up from Boston and the rock 'n roll lifestyle I had been living. The peninsula in Georgetown, Maine they'd bought in the middle of nowhere in 1972 didn't even have a road all the way down it, or power or a well, for that matter. For the first months they'd lived in a tent with my oldest brother Ernie, and the pet raccoon he found in the wilderness surrounding them. Oh, the mosquitos kept them company, too.

Even accounting for the yearly expanding exaggerations of my father, they must've been a true force, clogging the view through the screen. To this day, they can be vicious, depending on the temperatures and moisture levels in the critical spring months. But after all, as the joke goes, they are the Maine state bird.

My parents had dreams of homesteading. And they did, with strong backs and determination, and a cultural movement afoot to back them up. I remember the greenhouse, on its way to dilapidation by the time I reached the baseball playing age of 8. It was at the top of the sloping yard behind the house, rung with blueberry bushes, failing split rails fences, and once-fruitful peach and pear trees. The greenhouse was the perfect distance to hit a baseball and send an old pane crashing through to the weeds growing inside it. My father had gotten all the panes of glass from what were once my grandfather's greenhouses, dismantled in the late sixties to make way for the suburban march racing westward from Boston.

There were many changes afoot, culturally, and my parents were poised in the center. My father met my mother on a ski slope in 1968. My father's hefty beard was crusted with snow, the going look at the time, attracting even the glamorous ski bunnies like my mom, with their tight white bell bottom ski pants and glue-on eye lashes. They were married in the house in Lexington that same year, 1969. They had missed out on Woodstock, instead, having to fix the brakes on the Land Rover on the street outside their apartment just a block from the women's prison on Greenwich Avenue in Greenwich Village. Whether my father had planned it this way or not, his graduate degree from Columbia in psychology kept him out of combat. I never asked him. He was drafted

nonetheless as soon as he finished his degree and had to do his two years like everyone else who stayed in the country.

He usually speaks about his time in the Army in terms of playing basketball with the big black guys at the cement court outside their station in Annapolis, Maryland. He'd been a sporting and fitness guy ever since high school, playing football at Springfield College in Massachusetts, and despite his 4.0 grade point average, taking time to learn how to walk the length of the football field on his hands. He was the punter and fullback for the college team, getting drafting letters from the Dallas Cowboys and the 49ers.

Stubbornness and resolve are two ways to look at the same attribute, and you might say that my father has both of them on full display. The DMN is strong in him, for better or for worse. There's a story of him tripping on the deck of my parents' sailboat while trying to lift a generator on board. As he fell into the water he held onto it, sinking to the bottom and standing there with full confidence that, somehow, by sheer will he'd resolve the situation favorably. He still lives today so I can infer that, at least, his instinct for survival is stronger than his will.

In high school, football and gymnastics were his passion. He was the foundation guy for a three-man team. They would do tricks where one man climbed on top of my father's shoulders, and the next guy climbed on top of that guy's shoulders, and so on—feats of strength and balance. When I was a boy of ten or so he'd be doing his one hundred push-ups a day on the brown-carpeted living room floor or heading off for a jog after work in his gray, outdated sweat pants. The physicality of his life has served him well, now partway into his seventies and doing just fine. His Lebanese father never exercised a day in his life, I'm sure, and smoked a pack a day for forty years, still making

it to ninety. Even Lewella smoked in the 1950's though only at work. My father's first job, for his allowance, was emptying ashtrays around the house.

Just as I'm curious to better understand how I came from my parents, how my father ever came from the pairing of his parents is a bit of a mystery, and one of the reasons for this exploratory writing. He certainly got his willfulness from my grandmother, though I know my grandfather's was nothing to be trifled with either. Lewella recalled to us grandkids that she once did the unthinkable and marched down to the Town Hall in Winsted where Phil and a certain crowd of good old boys would play poker. They weren't the bunch of guys my grandmother appreciated Phil hanging around with, and she let him and them know it. She barged in and demanded that he come home right that instant. There was a standoff of some minutes, them both refusing to budge on some inner principles of strength, anger and futility.

"Of course," my grandmother said, "I knew he couldn't leave in front of the boys and look like an old sock."

He came home extra late that night, but he never went back and played with those boys again.

Some years later, he quit smoking after kidney stones in his sixties, and I don't imagine smokeless poker had the same appeal. No matter, Phil still got the occasional check in the mail from some lieutenant across the country making good on a poker debt from the war.

The war. My grandparents worked together at the social service office in Torrington, Connecticut while the country edged out of the Great Depression and into something closer to just a normal depression. They were married in 1944. Lewella said

that her favorite times during their courtship were driving through the rolling hills of Connecticut, singing harmony with each other. The war came along three years before they were married, but my grandfather was in his mid-to-late thirties and the first draftings didn't affect him. But as the war wore on, and the need for soldiers increased, it became apparent that he would be drafted, too, at thirty-six years old. And so Lewella and Phil were married, and the next day they left for officer's training in San Antonio, Texas. A couple months later, Lewella pregnant with my father, Phil was shipped off to India, a banal but exotic theater of the war. He wouldn't return until my father was two years old.

"He was so good with people; the men just respected him," Lewella would say of his war years.

In officer training he ascended the ranks swiftly, and by the time he returned from India was a lieutenant colonel. He died at ninety in 1999, and I was too young to ask all the great questions I can think of now. He was thirty-seven when my father was born, and my father was thirty-five when I was born. By the standard of those times, we missed a whole generation. I have a black-and-white picture of him in his uniform, a broad smile across his slightly rounded face. And in the loft above the boat shop there's a canvas and teak chair that officers in the eastern quarter of the war used. It pulls apart and rolls up into portable bundle. The red canvas is faded, but the teak is stronger than ever, hardened and gray.

I would've liked to have asked him about India. I would've liked to have asked him about his principles for living, and what made for happiness. It's easy to imagine the past as black and white, just like the photo of Uncle Rat the taxidermist. But of course, it

was lived in full color, and the world looked just like it did now. It may be the quirks of memory at work that make the past, and not just the photos, seem more monochromatic.

Science has shown that the details of experience dull with time, and the myriad memories coalesce along well-worn thought paths. This mental distillation helps us form judgments and better organize the vastness of life, but these tendencies stand stark like guards at the doorway of the past, making it difficult to get through the characters and family members inhabiting it. That's why I love the stories about my grandfather's early tragedies and the complicating factors of his Arab immigrant parents. They give the spark of life back into the story of his life. And I'm being a touch selfish in trying to fire it back up again in this whole project of life exploration. I've often thought that a practiced attunement to the lives of others would help me to feel more confident that someone else would take such care to appreciate my life as well, sometime down the road.

Chapter 5: Bleeding Heart

For all her strength and stubbornness, Lewella, was a bleeding heart liberal until the day she died. My father, if history continues as it has for all of time, will die a conservative Republican. It may have been for the better financially and morally, but I've always wished I got to experience the hippie side of my parents, like Ernie did, rather than the newly Evangelical Christian side I got stuck with. It was the eighties though, and everything was weird then. When my mother came home with her first puffy eighties hairdo, I reportedly said to her: "Momma, take that hair off!" The hippy movement had flamed out into the hills, and back-to-the-land was hard work. I imagine most hippies returned to their places of birth or back to the urban blah once they realized the sheer bulk of back-breaking labor required to eke a living from the ground. My parents never went back to their more convention way of living, if they ever engaged in such a thing, but their homesteading waned as the fervor of Jesus and the promises of Amway filled them to quaking. Amway, a pyramid scheme business involving getting people to buy certain products, and convincing them, in turn, to convince other people to buy more products was their gateway into Jesus, whether Jesus would've appreciated the association I'm not sure.

Chapter 6: Amway

Maybe they were driven away from their hippy dreams by the realities of time: three more boys added to the family, and an acceptance of the inexpediency of trying to grind your own flour and grow more than just the occasional sumptuous tomato and basic hearty greens. Or maybe it was the time: the excess of the eighties, the growing size of grocery stores, the fashion having gone out of the granola. Or maybe it was Amway, segueing with this capitalistic, Reaganite burgeoning sweeping the nation. By the time of my early years, my parents were full on running towards the dream of securing their fortune by “showing the plan,” selling pyramid schemes and all of that. I grew up going to Amway functions, (sometimes quite large gatherings of “distributors” put on, ostensibly, to “pump up” members in their conviction that they could someday achieve their dreams through Amway). And while my parents were out achieving their dreams I spent a little more time than I would've liked with babysitters.

Amway was founded by Rich DeVos and Jay Van Andel, two Michiganites with profound beliefs in capitalism and very American conceptions of Christianity. It was at an Amway function in the late seventies that my mother, feeling the immense pull of the Lord, grabbed my father's arm and heeded the altar call at the end of a Sunday morning “worship” service. Church attendees in their youth and fairly radical hippies into their thirties, whatever it was reclaimed them back into the fold in that carpeted convention center that night, and laid down the path for the fervency of their latter and still-continuing faith. It was into these shifting circumstances that I was born.

I heard stories about my mother grinding up avocados as baby food for Philip. I missed the train. At least I was breastfed, unlike Ernie, who was unlucky enough to be

born into the early sixties when that just wasn't done. Remarkably, his immune system is legendary—though he is on the short side, which could be attributed to the stature of his wild Irish biological father, whom my mother married and divorced before her eighteenth birthday.

Once, in 2008, in an evening of drinking, just Ernie and I at a cottage on a lake, he opened up to me about his father, the only time he's done so. He remembers huddling under my mother's legs one night as his father, drunk as usual, smashed the window in the door trying to break into Grandma May's house and see my mother and him. I only met Ernie Sr. once, at Ernie Jr.'s wedding. He was charming. And I was too drunk to judge how drunk he was.

The details about Ernie Sr. have always been difficult to parse, not least because of the sensitivity of the subject, but I mention it as a subtext to my mother's life. Before she'd graduated high school she'd already been married, borne a child, and divorced, all this in 1963. And she'd lost her father about six years before that. Her love of horses preceded both of these life-altering events. The story goes that, in a bid to get a horse, at sixteen-years-old, she and her cousin Nancy, found old building scraps around the greenhouses and started pounding together boards to make a stable. They made it far enough and persisted long enough that her father bought them a horse and built them a stable. This was followed by more horses. Lessons to locals funded expansion. Mom had seven horses by the time she was seventeen, a small business owner with some money and heaps of manure to show for it.

My father met my mother when Ernie was just four, but Ernie's small stature and outrageously "creative" personality always kept them a certain distance apart - at least

that's how I imagine it. My father is unconventional I'd say, but certainly not by Ernie's standards. Almost no one I've met is. At least half the time I'm talking with Ernie I have no idea what he is saying. It's not that he is incoherent. He has a keen sense of storytelling, and a gregariousness that abounds like his round belly. But his brain is unencumbered by normal realities in a way that is hard to overstate. I can only imagine the frustrations my dad must've encountered in his attempts to forge fathering methods for such a stepchild as Ernie. Nothing worked it seemed, for they couldn't be more different, or have more diverging life philosophies and practices. The only thing they share now, ironically, is support for Donald Trump, Ernie being one of those lifelong liberals whose disaffection with their lives chased them into the open arms of someone who promises them change.

Not that my father and Ernie aren't close. But Ernie being Ernie, I wonder if he's close to anyone. I've always attributed this inaccessibly creative side of Ernie to the genetics of his biological father, but I suppose it was probably coaxed along its way by the alternative circumstances in which he was raised by mom and dad. Ernie tells stories of their time living on a legendary sailing yacht in Annapolis harbor in the years following my father's military service. Nina, as the schooner was named, was one of the fastest ships in the world when launched in 1928, but was in disrepair when my folks bought her around 1970. A wooden ship pushing fifty years old is usually nearing the end of her life, but this one proved the perfect domineering task for my hard-headed, incessantly working father and persistently optimistic mother.

Stories from this time all sit well with the themes of entrepreneurship and counter-culture living. My mother learned Hatha yoga and taught classes in a time when few

knew the difference between yoga and toga. She knitted bibs and sold them at craft fairs. My father learned of the endless repairs an old wooden boat required. They lived on Nina for a couple of years with big visions of sailing through the Panama Canal and up the West Coast. But the boat was so big (66 feet) that it wasn't possible to sail with just the two of them, the back mast of the schooner rig being eighty-six feet high, and the keel extending nearly twelve feet under water.

A few years ago my mother sent me a New York Times article about the disappearance of the Nina. She'd been caught in a cyclone in the Indian Ocean and never seen again, two families, seven people in all, gone down with her.

Little red-haired Ernie endured those two years of their sailing dreams before they sold the boat and bought the peninsula in Maine. My favorite story is of him coming down from his berth at night and seeing my mom sorting through a bag of weed, getting ready to share a smoke with some friends. He wasn't sure what it was, but he sensed something strange and inappropriate, and started crying. It's so unlike the mother I grew up with that I love the story simply for the image of her there in the cockpit of their old wooden ship.

Missing out on this level of happiness probably had as many benefits as it had drawbacks, and I had plenty of alternative living in my childhood. How much "alternative" I guess I'm still discovering, and in this writing, trying to remember. It's hard to be self-reflective about my own abnormality, seeing that it's the most normal thing there is to me. I keep going back, and at some point, I'll have to get on forward. But I had to establish the depth of the entrepreneurial base from which I've grown in order to

fulfill the needs of the story I'm trying to tell. And remember, sometimes life's lesser flashes form the constellations.

Chapter 7: Temperament

I was kicked out of high school with two weeks left to go. It was the same school we'd gone on the Mexico trip with, the alternative Christian one that I attended from fifth to twelfth grade. There were never more than one hundred students in the entire school and my graduating class consisted of just four of us—only three walked across the stage, since I didn't make it. A small school has its ups and downs. One up is that it was rather easy to be a star athlete, and I was. I was captain and MVP of both the soccer and basketball teams, competing as much with my sheer determination to win as with any innate coordination. Once, with a chance to win a soccer game against our rivals in the closing minutes of the game, I was pulled down by the opposing team's goalie as I dribbled past him. The refs didn't call it. I walked up to the ref and spewed all of the invective my seventeen-year-old self was capable of, interweaving it with my considerations about his mother. He was so upset that he walked off the field and ended the game right then and there and we had to forfeit.

Another time, this one a basketball game in my senior year, I became so overwhelmed with the desire to win that when a teammate failed to play up to my standards, I told him off in the middle of the court. He responded by balling his fist into my stomach. We were both ejected. It's funny how things like that mean so much at the time, and yet later, from some twenty years of distance, seem so paltry. I still have in me that fire to win, as much as ever. But I don't mind losing. I don't mind a lot of things that I used to care about deeply, and I attribute it to having the shit beat out of me by drugs

and alcohol, a divorce, and a three-year battle with illness. When you've had to reckon with matters of life and death, matters of anything less lose their sting.

One of the downsides to being raised religiously and attending a Christian school was the incredible persistence of existential faith crises. It took a crisis of addiction to finally knock these out of me too. In college, every time I read Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* I would follow Raskolnikov's lead into the mires of doubt and belief. So big were the eternal questions that they overwhelmed my brain and spilled over into bodily emotions. I remember nights, smoking American Spirit cigarettes and staring up at the stars, and being ruled by the wonder of it all, both good and bad. The big meaning of life questions were ever ready to slip out of the shadows and swarm my mind. Listening to Bob Dylan probably didn't help ease the questioning. I remember once sitting just outside our college's no-tobacco zone in my white Ford Escort wagon smoking cigarettes with my good friend Mark Longhurst, himself the child of a pastor, and being bowled over by the lyrics to a newly released bootleg song of Dylan's called "Angelina:" "Beat a path of retreat up them spiral staircases. Pass the tree of smoke, pass the angel with four faces. Begging God for mercy and weepin' in unholy places, Angelina."

I only ever made it into college because I crept my way in slowly over the course of a year of part-time study. My high school grades would never have afforded me an acceptance letter. When I was kicked out of high school there were only two weeks left to the finish line. My grades up to that point were just enough to buoy my tallies against the undertow of the zeros I received on all my final exams. I don't remember caring. It was only a week or two later that I was kicked out of my house too, breaking the rules again, lying and stealing and smoking pot at every available opportunity. It's unconscionable to

me now, the things I was capable of in the throes of addiction. This unfathomability from the standpoint of relative sanity is one of the best arguments for addiction being classed as a disease. What was I thinking, with two weeks until graduation, when I half borrowed half stole the principle's truck and puffed it full of weed smoke? I guess I wasn't.

Chapter 8: Finances

I like to say that I've really only made one good financial decision in my whole life, and that was to let my mother make the decision for me; that is, to build the cottage. But even this is giving myself too much credit. The seed of what I hope someday will be my retirement was planted while I was asleep, unseat-belted in the back of Alan Shearer's wood paneled Jeep Cherokee doing 70 m.p.h. on cruise control down an out-of-the-way highway in New Hampshire, at 3 a.m. And maybe this story has as much to do with my memory problems as it does with any dreams of financial independence. Al had had a drink or two, I'm sure, but it was the late-night driving rather than the booze that played the role in his falling asleep on our way back from a friend's wedding. A bit of bad luck, too: he fell asleep and the Jeep drifted off the highway on an exit ramp, where there was no rumble strip to wake him. He woke to the sound and impact of us hitting the exit sign, for a subsequent exploration of the crash site revealed deep tire ruts cutting back up towards the highway just after the severed base of the sign. It was too much for the Jeep to handle, the slope, the speed. It took to the air, twisting in its flight some forty yards down a slope. Pictures of the Jeep show that the big impact came on the front corner of the driver's side roof, seemingly leveling it to the hood as it landed and continued its romp down the slope. How many times did it roll? I've always recounted five times, but I have no idea where I got that number, or how we would've known. Al and Nate, our buddy in the passenger's seat, came to shortly after we stopped, with cuts and bruises, but no significant injuries. The Jeep somehow ended up back on its wheels.

They described looking back at me and thinking immediately that I was dead. My face was covered in blood and I was not responding, lying peacefully across the back seat. They ran up the slope to the highway, and, in this pre-cell phone era, started trying to flag down a car on the sparsely travelled highway. The first few cars drove right by them. The next one stopped for a bit, but pulled off when they approached it. One of the passer-bys had a phone and called the police.

My first moment of awareness was some ten or twenty minutes after the accident. I woke in the darkness, on my back, perfectly laid across the rear seat of the Jeep, my head propped against the inside of the rear passenger's side door. I heard a distant yelling. It must've been Nate or Al trying to get a car to stop. I remember the desperation in the yell, and get goosebumps just now, thinking about it. Just after the yell came a faint light from the passing car. The Jeep was out of sight, down a hill, but there was just enough light that I could see the hair, mine, hanging in shreds from the shards of the broken window. I heard the yelling, and I saw the hair. I knew who I was, but I had no recollection of how I got in this car, or where I was. My first thoughts were towards putting together the clues. I figured I'd been in a car accident. The darkness, the car on a slope, far from any road. The aching in my body. My lips and face felt bashed. I tried to swallow, but glass cut my throat and, as I shifted my jaw, shards crunched between my teeth. I tried to move slightly and felt a large crack in my pelvis. The thought came to me: *Loren, you've been in an accident and you've broken your back. You're not supposed to move if you've broken your back. You're not supposed to move if you've broken your back. And you have.* I lay still on the seat and tried to put together more pieces, but

nothing came. There soon were more lights and more yelling. Maybe Al came back and said something me, but I don't think so.

The lady cop showed up first, but I'm not sure after how long. I remember being annoyed that the first question she asked was whether the driver had been drinking. I must've just learned a new word, because my response, which I remember clearly was "No, Al is abstemious." Yes, I used to study GRE vocab for kicks, in some atonement for getting kicked out of high school, perhaps, and never graduating. She made a strange sound, a snicker, almost like a laugh. I tried to smile, not that she would have seen it in the dark. But it seemed an adequate response to the gravity of the situation.

I never felt like I was going to die. Maybe if I could've seen my face, scratched through with glass, and the small patch of my scalp scraped clean of hair and skin, I would been more afraid. I simply felt my body had recovered some essential state of rest. Even the pain was calm. The sloping field was peaceful, the New Hampshire summer night just the right temperature, warm and serene. I'd broken my back, and I didn't have to move if I didn't want to.

It is funny what the mind remembers. I was upset, more upset than I should've been, that they decided to cut off my nice, striped, pale-pink and white shirt. It was the perfect wedding shirt, a balance of casual and class that, I fancied, matched myself. There's a great picture of the three of us on our way to the wedding. Al has a handle bar mustache, Nate, a casual, cockeyed glance with a finger pointed towards the camera, and I'm tilted slightly to the left, my long, wet hair hanging to the shoulder of my nice pink shirt, a light-blue soft pack of American Spirit cigarettes tucked in the breast pocket.

The paramedics arrived some minutes later and shifted me gently and laboriously onto a board and strapped me in so that not one part of me could move. There was battery acid everywhere, and it has started to melt through my shirt. A spare battery, a toolkit, and a set of trailer hitch balls tumbled around with me as the Jeep had rolled down the slope.

For the next three hours, until they had taken all of the X-rays of my back that possibly could be taken, and confirmed that nothing was broken, there was plenty of pain to distract me from the pain in my ass of lying on the stiff board. I was in the far thresholds of discomfort for many hours, the serenity of the dark field in which the Jeep came to rest replaced by the violence of neon lights and worried-looking attendants. One nurse, and, as her shift ended, another pried and picked and brushed and swabbed the glass from my face and mouth and hair. I remember asking again and again why they couldn't give me something for the pain. I don't remember the answer, maybe something about not being sure if I was drunk, or of what else I might have taken that would interact. I don't remember if I told them, that at that point, at age twenty-two, I'd already been sober for three years, and gone to over a thousand recovery meetings.

Chapter 9: Shards

A doctor came in after the nurses had done their work, I'm not sure how many hours later, and gave me the blow by blow. A piece of metal had entered the inside of my right leg, just below the knee, and exited a few inches later, just below the kneecap. My head went through the window during the roll and I had sustained a deep gash at the hairline. There was a chunk of skin missing from there, as well a three-quarter- by half-inch piece of skin missing below my eye. He would stitch up the leg, but they were going to wait for a plastic surgeon specialist to do my face. Thank God they did, for the leg looked like a Frankenstein stitching job, and still kind of does, while the face turned out as beautiful as ever. It has taken me some time to get used to seeing myself in pictures though, with one eye slightly more closed than the other. But asymmetry is kind of the going style now, anyway.

After the glass-scraping, the repeated Novocain needles in my face were of little notice. And I was glad to have to close my eyes while the stitching needles did the surgeon's bidding. I stayed out of the sun for eighteen months after that, going around with suntan lotion and wide brimmed hats, per his instruction. My various limps eventually went away, too, and it turned out I hadn't broken a single bone.

At some point after daybreak in the hospital Al and Nate came in and we exchanged sad glances with each other like I don't think I'd ever done with another human before. Neither Al nor Nate sustained any significant injuries. They were both wearing seatbelts.

We were released from the hospital after the one overnight stay, only eight or nine hours all told. My parents came and picked us up. I saw on their faces what my face must have looked like. We drove to the scene of the accident, looking at the deep ruts and the severed exit sign, and then to where the wrecker had towed the Jeep. It hardly looked like a vehicle. If not for the front tires jutting out from it, one might have guessed it was some industrial appliance having just been crushed for easier transportation to the steel recycling plant.

Eventually in the coming days, I remembered the wedding, the dancing, Dave and Caren, the couple, looking so trim and splendid. I even remembered my last thoughts in the Jeep before going to sleep. A personal life code went through my mind as I unclipped my belt and stretched out: *You're only allowed to take your seatbelt off in a car when your father is driving.*

Chapter 10: Crash Course

This was fifteen years before the campaign of concussion awareness got rolling. No one mentioned the possible effects of my concussion to me--no doctor, no one. There was no talk of rehabilitation, other than a single follow up visit to the plastic surgeon. I hobbled around on a cane for a while with my wide-brimmed hat and headed back to college in Massachusetts with Al and Nate in the fall. I'm sure the brain has its own equivalent of scar tissue, and that I've got plenty of it up there, tucked in around concussive abrasions. If the damage in my mind is anything like the gnarled muscular formations around my left thigh, then no wonder it's not quite up to the task of precision of recall.

The tie to this event and 2008, as I hinted, is financial. It was a two-year battle to get the ten thousand dollars or so of doctor's bills from that one night in the hospital covered by the insurance company. There was some squabbling between which company was liable for what: Al's insurance, my college health insurance, or my own car insurance. In the end, it was a lawyer who set me straight on how these things worked. I had started a painting company in college, the year before the accident, filling up the summers with flip-flops and ladders and some damn good money. This particular summer my good friend Matt and my younger brother Chris were painting a lawyer's house five miles from the college we attended. The subject of my accident, two years earlier, came up, and he mentioned that his firm handled personal injury cases.

From that point I was more or less swept along the journey of litigation. It was baffling to me that the insurance company, when it was clear they were liable, would

rather take its chance in a legal case than just pay the damn money. I wasn't even asking for anything more than the medical bills, but that's not to say that I was a saint. After the lawyers sweettalked me about the immensity of the emotional and psychological and long-term effects of such an accident, it became very easy to feel justified in seeking enlarged financial reimbursement. From the perspective of seventeen years later, I can certainly acknowledge the long-term effects of such injuries, something my youthful self at the time could not have. After an additional year of litigation and a settlement I ended up with twenty thousand dollars, around eight thousand dollars of which I quickly parted with in three years of attending Burning Man and six weeks in Bali. I was working during this time, and not exactly living large, but I'm not the greatest with money, and having extra makes the weight of it more cumbersome in the back pocket.

It was three years after my settlement, perhaps seeing that I was unwisely parting with it, that my mom hatched the plan for the remaining twelve thousand dollars. The deal was, roughly, that I would put in my money, and six months-worth of labor towards the cottage. My folks would match my efforts with money of their own, and together we'd be able to complete the building. Two years after completion, they would start to pay me back a yearly sum for five years, after which the building would be theirs and I'd have a good block of money in the bank. The number was high, and the weight of adult responsibilities was starting to bear on my twenty-eight-year-old self. What's six months anyway? A change of scene from the Boston and rock 'n roll band life could be nice. By that time, I wasn't exactly sober anymore. I'd drifted from my sober meetings after about three years. And like a story I'd heard many times in those meetings, I slowly forgotten

the pain of addiction, and eventually when the idea of a drink popped up I had no defense against it.

Chapter 11: Meetings

It was uncle Billy, mom's oldest brother, who first told me about these "meetings" that helped people stay sober. My parents must have confided to him that I was having trouble with alcohol and drugs. I was seventeen the summer before my senior year in high school. My mother's side of the family was up at our annual reunion gathering at grandma May's cottage on Lake Winnisquam in New Hampshire. Uncle Billy was the joker of the family, with an indelible fondness for pranks and outlandish skits. One year he performed as "Fefe," the French stripper, complete with a pale yellow bra stuffed full of socks. Another year it was as the "Winnisquam water fairy," a costume very similar to Fefe's, but this time the dancing was out on the front lawn with sprinklers and strobe lights, for the whole lake to see. His physique, balding and round above the waist, aided the hilarity of his efforts. When he broached the subject of alcoholism with me it was the summer of 1997. Billy and I had just finished a game of horseshoes, a favorite pastime of my family's when we were at the lake house. After the game was over he turned to me awkwardly and said: "You know, Loren, um, I used to have lots of trouble with my drinking. I nearly lost everything twenty years ago. I was so drunk once that I pushed Marilyn (his wife, my aunt) down to the ground when she was pregnant with the twins."

I remember wondering why he was telling me all of this. I followed as he walked slowly down the small road running along the lake. He talked about the meetings he started attending after the twins were born and how he'd been able to stay away from a drink for nineteen years "One day at a time," and "But for the grace of God." I wasn't ready to hear what he had to say, quitting being far from my young mind, but the

conversation never left me. There was a tenderness that came over Uncle Billy, a sad conviction and longing that was so far removed from the Billy I'd thought him to be. Fifteen years later, as he was dying of cancer, he said to me: "You know, meetings are good when things are going good, but they're *great* when things are going bad."

A year after our conversation by the lake, in August 1998, it was Uncle Billy who paid the way for me to attend the best teen rehab in the country, Hazelden, in Minnesota—to the tune of \$600 per day. I'd awoken on the morning of July 30th to the gentle kick of the long, uniformed leg of a police officer. I was on the floor of my friend's bedroom. I'd been sleeping wherever would have me for the last three or four weeks, couches, dilapidated treehouses, or out under the stars on warm nights. It was my parents who called the cops on me. My friend's mother called my mother and told her I was sleeping on her son's bedroom floor. At that point I'd been stealing and forging my way into quite a drug-and-alcohol habit, taking checks from my mother's purse and learning what things around our house, or the houses of others, brought good cash at the pawn shops. That morning the police took me in to the station and searched my belongings, finding weed rolled up into joints and stuffed into a pack of Marlboro reds. I also had a military switchblade that I'd stolen from someone along the way, an illegal weapon. I ended up with seventeen counts of forgery, felony charges, possession of marijuana with intent to sell, and possession of dangerous weapons.

I'm not sure what the full extent of the court sentence would have been, but enough to put me behind bars. Going to rehab was a great way to avoid the full brunt of the charges, and I was ready by that point, anyway. The homeless life had lost its glamour the first night I woke up in the rain, near my hometown, about a week before my

arrest, wet and soggy under a flimsy blanket in an abandoned children's fort with no roof. I wasn't capable of digesting the full gravity of my condition at seventeen, but I'd felt enough of the weight of guilt and shame from the things I'd done to know that something was amiss in me.

As I was leaving for the airport to catch my plane to rehab in Minnesota, my mother walked up, gave me a long hug, and handed me a carton of Marlboro reds, my preferred brand. Somehow this sticks out to me more than anything else about that time. I think it was my mother's acceptance of my adulthood, and a sort of strange letting go of the child I was and a hope for the man I might become. It was also an admission of the gravity of my situation, as if to say that she'd fully realized that none of the typical concerns parents might have about their children were of any importance in the face of the scope of my addiction.

And boy did we ever smoke in rehab. There were cigarette breaks every fifteen minutes: between therapy sessions, before and after breakfast, right before bed. After that first week, when I'd already sucked down all ten packs, my mother sent me another carton. I went through four cartons of Marlboro reds in the 28-day program while I sat and listened to lots of men and women, like Uncle Billy, coming and telling all of us teenagers about what it used to be like, what happened, and what it was like now.

It's a big fog in my head now, that time in rehab, and I bet it is for most people. But I know that at some point during those 28 days, a few of us went on a field trip to a sober meeting. I remember entering a small basement in a church or community hall, with worn red concrete floors and tamped-down rugs. We sat in metal chairs in a semi-

circle, thirty of us or more, men and women both. We went around and introduced ourselves by our first names. When my turn came, I said: “My name’s Loren, and I’m an alcoholic.”

I’ve since said those words so many times that whenever I’m in a group setting and called upon to introduce myself, I have to remind myself not to say “and I’m an alcoholic” after my name. It’s amazing what human beings can become accustomed to, because sober meetings seem totally commonplace to me now, having been to literally thousands. But to a newcomer there are many things that might startle. When I first started going to meetings, smoking was still allowed in most places and the allowance was taken advantage of to the fullest. Heavy clouds greeted entrants at the door and grew heavier throughout. Old-time sober meeting veterans admonished newbies to get involved by cleaning out the small, paper foil ashtrays. And then there were the banners: royal blue, and rimmed with deep yellow-colored fringe, with sayings like I’d heard from Uncle Billy that day by the lake: “One Day At A Time,” “First Things First,” and “Keep It Simple.” I’ve often heard in sober meetings this last one made into an acronym for those particularly stubborn alcoholics like myself: K.I.S.S., or “Keep it simple, stupid.”

And then there is the talk of God and openness to emotions and pain. Old men, with weary, smoked-out voices regularly speak frankly about the devastation alcohol wreaked in their lives, and of how God, or a higher power, helped them stay sober. It’s one of the only places I’ve heard the use of God outside of any religious affiliation. And the men and women who talked about God sure as hell didn’t look like the type of people who would utter the words I heard from their mouths. Bikers, junkies, broken or once-

broken humans with cigarettes dangling from their mouths talked about God as if it was a commonplace subject.

Raw emotion takes center stage in sober meetings, just as much as it takes backstage in the rest of everyday life. The list of oddities within the rooms of sober meetings goes on and on, but I've come to learn that it's precisely that particular blend of radical behavior change that may be the only hope for people with such deranged psychologies that they are willing and eager to drink themselves to death. I even came to love the sayings on the walls and from the lips of the curmudgeonly old timers. I've mined many a gold nugget from those sayings, taking them with me out into the greater world: "There's no such thing as being too dumb to get sober, but you can sure as hell be too smart." Or, "Having a resentment is like taking poison and waiting for the other person to die." And my favorite, especially of use in marital contexts: "Would you rather be right, or would you rather be happy?"

Chapter 12: Cheers

I went on to attend two more rehabs in the year after Hazelden, one in Montana and one in Louisiana, racking up more than 150 days of treatment, but not many more than 150 days of sobriety. Rehab, for teenagers like myself, was a sort of deranged summer camp. Each of us was there for reasons of life and death. Very few people make it into rehab by accident. And, by definition, someone in rehab is very recently sober. The chaos of newly sober teenagers was balanced by the rigidity of the structure. At my last rehab (as a teenager, at least) in Louisiana, we had military-esque bedroom inspections every morning before breakfast. The beds had to be made in such a way that a quarter would bounce on them, and even the lint trap on the dryer was inspected for remnants. There was a no-facial-hair policy, and even a five o'clock shadow was penalized with restricted television rights, or off-rehab outings. A report on the cleanliness of each dormitory room was read aloud after breakfast.

I forget what the demerit was for, exactly, but it was something petty, and something that I didn't do, like not washing my dishes or refilling the toilet paper. My infraction was reported to the group after breakfast that morning, and of course I protested whatever it was with vigor. Alcoholics are more capable of holding onto resentment than any other type of person I've met, especially justified resentments. I fought my demerit all that morning, threatening to leave. There were special meetings with the faculty and the friends I'd made there, all imploring me to not let such a little thing drive a wedge between me and my sobriety. But I was not to be swayed. I packed all of my meager belongings into a black plastic trash bag and rode off down the street on

a small BMX I borrowed from a friend. I had no plans, and narrowly avoided a night out on the streets. My high school friend from Maine Western Union-ed me \$50 for a Greyhound bus ticket back north. I caught the last bus that evening.

Each time I'd left rehab before the insidiousness of addiction would work its slow, deceptive march on my psychology. On that thirty-hour, circuitous Greyhound bus ride back north, I remember overhearing a young man with a tattoo of a lion on his shoulder. He was speaking resentfully about having just been kicked out of the military for failing a drug test. At a rest stop I saw him in the dark shadows near the highway smoking a joint. He looked so pitiful, so lost, and I recognized myself in him.

The day after I got back up to Maine, while staying with the same friend who wired me the money for my bus ticket, my demons had once again hopped back into place on both shoulders. The inevitability of using subsumed my mind. There are small pivots in life, happening all of the time, unnoticed, but this one was immense with implication, and I knew it. I picked up the phone and called the local sober meetings chapter in the area and they told me about a meeting happening that night, not very far from where I was staying. I went. The next night I went again. I grabbed onto sober meetings with the desperation of a drowning man. Nothing else suddenly mattered, the crush of my past weighing down around me. I went to 180 meetings in the first 90 days after I left that rehab, pitting the sheer bulk of sobriety exposure against the ineffably manipulative workings of my warped mind. It worked for almost four years, and would have kept working, no doubt, had I kept working it. But the mind has a way of forgetting, especially what it doesn't want to remember.

The first drink I had after my nearly four-year stint of sobriety was with Nate, the same friend I'd been in the car accident with two years earlier. It was in late 2003 or early 2004, and the drink was a Heineken, cold and green with beads of perspiration running down it. It tasted great. I used to think that this four-year period between when I'd started drinking again and moving back to Maine to build the cottage was one of the only periods of moderate drinking and drug use that I'd ever sustained. Looking back on it though, I can see that getting high on weed multiple times a day is not exactly moderation. But I was so good at being high at that point, after many years of practice, that the sting of addiction didn't penetrate into the fibers of my life as quickly as it had in the past. I plodded along, and even thrived creatively with music-making and lyric writing. And all the great, sober-ish friends I'd made in college kept my demons at bay, for a little while, until 2008 that is.

Chapter 13: Foundations

There's a great photo of my father and me leaning against a stack of timbers in the back of the silvery-grey boatyard truck, staring at the building site on a slight rise up from the road. It was just a blank canvas, all the blander for the light snow that had fallen the night before. The plan was to build a semi-timber-frame, three-bedroom cottage with a long and deep screen porch facing the river. But to start, it was a shovel and dirt, stripping the ledge of what we hoped was no more than a foot or two of clinging soil, much like my parents had done thirty-five years earlier in planting their fruit trees and hand digging the humble foundations of their home, my home.

Chapter 14: The Brakemen

Another thread binds the car accident to the present, and more so to the not-so distant past: music. At the wedding, I connected with a college acquaintance, Jesse. Up to that point I'd known him distantly as a great jazz keyboard player and English literature aficionado. He'd had a bit to drink that night at the wedding and we made a plan to start a band. He may not have known that I was sober and would hold him to it, but I did. Jesse became my first, and really the deepest musical compatriot I would ever have. He was an intellectual, both musically and academically, slightly tall and thin with short hair, a short-trimmed reddish beard and round, gold-framed glasses to top it off. He tended towards jazz, and artists like Bruce Coburn and Joni Mitchell, but we shared a passion for Dylan and connected musically more so than I would ever connect with someone again.

I'd been writing music since fifteen. For me, writing songs was an extension of learning how to play an instrument. To this day I've "learned" how to play the guitar, harmonica, banjo, piano, mandolin and the ukulele, but I've never been able to make myself master them any more than would be helpful for writing a given song I'm working on. Music has always been about creation for me. I've written literally hundreds of songs (one year alone, in Sweden in 2011, I wrote one hundred), but if prompted I'd only be able to play ten or so today. Practicing something already created never felt like a full embrace of the art.

When it first came to me music was magic, and I wanted to be a part of it. Listening to songs gave me what alcohol did: a window to the beyond, to the world as I wanted it to be: full of wonder. Dylan's "Positively Fourth Street" was one song that

impacted me early on, at eleven or twelve-years-old, with its twirling organ melodies and sharp, accusing lyrics. I remember my parents' meager record collection: four Dylan albums: "Greatest Hits Volume 1," "Desire," "Bring it All Back Home," and "Nashville Skyline," A Kris Kristofferson record, and the soundtrack to "American Graffiti," a collection of late fifties and early sixties oldies like "Rockin' Round the Clock" and "Heart and Soul."

At fifteen, I could write songs for hours, piling lyrics on top of each other, forming worlds, and going to places in my mind that day-to-day life wouldn't allow. If drugs and making music acted in similar ways on my mind, why not combine them? It's no coincidence that they've been paired so often by so many others. Drugs pull apart the normal fabric in the mind, breaking down walls it has erected and opening up new doors, and so does music at its best.

I'm not sure the music I made was music at its best, but there was something in it, some of the marrow of art. Even as a teenager I could slip into this creative lyrical flow where my mind would tune into some lingual level slightly above and beyond the norm. It almost felt like tapping into a primal spirit of language, where images and ideas bounced around loosely, associations were free and vibrating, and meaning could be found in unexpected places.

"He had age in his teeth" is the lyric that pops into my mind as I write. It was from one of the first songs I ever recorded, "Face on a Train." I went into a creative tunnel in my mind, imagining different facets of life as passing faces on a train. And then I pulled out and up and back, metaphorically getting at the feeling of the indifference of the world by imagining a deity looking down on a little helpless girl "as a face on a

passing train.” It’s not the greatest thing I’ve ever written, and there are some lyrics I’d change today, but there’s a bit of life in it, and I mention it here as an example of a linguistic path in the brain I could walk down that was not bound up by normal signifier histories.

I’ve always loved the Bob Dylan line from “Tambourine Man,” “Yes to dance beneath the diamond skies with one hand waving free,” and if I ever have a mid-life crisis and get a tattoo, that would be it. I think it’s a great example of getting at some potent meaning with imagery and linguistic creativity. In this case the lyric describes joy, for me, and in the line is all the trappings of it: solitary experiences of the vastness of the world and the universe beyond, and our little, wonderful part in it. There’s also something both primal and modern all at once: both the prehistoric, ritualistic sense of humans dancing around fires, and the rejuvenation of those rituals in the twentieth-century hippy movements and beyond.

Music was sort of an awakening for me. Just like with alcohol and drugs (which I would start to use shortly thereafter), music gave me a window into the world as I wanted it to be: laden with meaning and significance, emotion and power.

I remember sitting and daydreaming near a big tree on the property when I was a child. I built whole worlds in my imagination. There were special flying machines going in and out of tunnels and elaborate forts with four wheelers inside them. My child’s mind was incredibly free, looking back on it now, there was nowhere I couldn’t go. On road trips I’d look out the window and be snowboarding along the guard rails, twisting around the telephone poles and hopping driveways with impossible jumps.

Music was a sort of booster to my slowly hardening brain functions. Listening to Dylan and The Beatles could take you anywhere, too. Dylan's "Visions of Johanna" is an entire world inside one song. I remember listening to "Lucy in the Sky with Diamonds" and floating away on the harpsichord lines and swirling along with Lennon's compressed and flanged voice: "Picture yourself on a boat on a river." I was there, and I wanted to take others along with me on my own journeys. It's no wonder that teenagers get obsessed with music, a sort of rebellion in the brain, just as much as it is societal. It may be something like the brain's reversion back to childhood, like psychedelic experiences. For me, at least, it definitely worked along pathways in my mind that I wanted to follow.

I had taken piano lessons since I was ten, paid for by Lewella and, from a distance, insisted upon by her. She had such conviction about the value of learning to play music, and a love for her troublesome and flamboyant grandchild, that she made damn sure I stuck with it. I remember crying to my mother that I wanted to quit, that I hated practicing so much. My first piano teacher, Ms. Moynihan, had been as sweet as a human could be, but she died of brain cancer after a year of lessons. The second was spicier: Ms. Neal was nice enough, but had a much sharper personality, and she smoked cigarettes before and immediately following the half-hour lessons. Her teeth were shiny yellow, with gums just barely holding them in place. But she was cannier than Ms. Moynihan, sensing my desire to quit. We quickly set aside the good old John Thompson's piano primers for contemporary music...well, contemporary-ish. It being the early 1990's, Elton John had already peaked and receded, but we started there. When I got a hold of The Beatles Anthology my entire attitude towards the piano changed. I can picture it now, the shiny golden-brown cover with the blocky font. At Ms. Neal's

direction, seeing how much I was now practicing, we had it rebound like a spiral notebook, with large, black plastic fastenings.

Eventually there were red check marks on the pages of just about every classic in the book, Ms. Neal's sign that I'd played it sufficiently well after my week of practice. I'd play for an hour or so every day on the light brown upright piano that my grandparents had bought for me. If the uptick to the Beatles Anthology was much more practicing, the downside was that I discovered these letters hanging out just above the staff—chords! I quickly forsook reading the individual notes and playing the melodies for singing the notes and playing the chords. It was much easier and much more fun. And, of course, I regret that choice to this day as I never really broke that well into the world of reading music. I'm sure Lewella was upset about that, but the lift that this new discovery gave to my interest in music was sufficient to balance out any dismay. Plus, I was the only one of the brothers to survive the chopping block of piano lessons, so she had to take what she could get. I lasted more than five years in piano lessons, none of the other brothers surviving more than a year.

I have fond memories of our family sing-alongs around Uncle Doug's baby grand piano in the basement of Phil and Lewella's house. We'd sing old hymns and classic pop from the twenties and thirties. At some point in the proceedings, Lewella would demand that Phil come over to the piano and sing a solo while she accompanied. The song that sticks in my mind is "Oh My Papa," in which a son paints a beautiful picture of his recently passed father. I heard it recently on the radio, and it sent me back to the basement. But, more than that, it took me back in history. I thought about my own father and how one day before long, those words would ring true for me. The history of it all,

the incessant march of generations, both beautiful and heartbreaking, came rushing over my body. I felt the human I am in a way that encompassed the forefathers and foremothers who'd made me, and even the generations that will spring forth from me. Music is like that. It can be a key to many doors in the mind, doors that open to portals of time and mystery. Music, if tended to in the playing or the listening, can break through the dumbing down of the brain that accumulates from repetitive experience.

I wonder if forcing myself to take piano lessons, and being forced to do the same by the indomitable, if distant, pressure from Lewella, was a key factor in me becoming who I am. And not just in the sense that I eventually followed my songwriting aptitude towards the beginnings of a career in music. Maybe the force of music at that critical juncture of my life disallowed some of the mental hardening that otherwise would've taken hold. Of course, drugs are pretty good at keeping young minds open too, for better or worse.

I don't think I played music the first time I smoked pot, but I know I did the second. From the first chord on my Ovation twelve-string guitar, a new relationship was born. I don't remember anything else about the experience, but that chord still rings out in my mind as if it was yesterday. From 14 years old to 28, my relationship with weed was the longest relationship I have ever been in, lasting twelve years, with all the common ups and downs, "highs," and lows (come downs). In 1994 Tom Petty's album "Wildflowers" had just come out, and "Mary Jane's Last Dance" was an early favorite to play for me and my friends.

Chapter 15: Stonewalled

This period in my life, 2008, became the greatest and by far the worst. The vast spread of emotions and the sheer velocity of time and experience piled up into a mass of life too heavy for me to abide within. It also put a stamp on my future and sealed up some of my past in a tomb that I still can't pry open.

Maybe it was having so much time away from friends and the distractions of my band and carpentry business that startled my mind to activity. Maybe it was Maine, and the beauty of the place I was staying, my parent's finally completed house. Al, Nate and I, the car accident comrades, had moved to Maine that summer of 2000 when we were near-fatally bound together, to help my father get started on the building of their long dreamed-for stone house. The old crumbling walls of the stone foundations just up from the cliff nook of my childhood came to life again with new building materials and bustling young college boys eager to create. We pulled down the old rotted plywood on the second floor that, through teenhood, became increasingly wrought with leg holes as my brothers and I, or our friends, crashed through the soft spots. We started by framing out the concrete and stone with wooden interior partitions. Little by little we filled in the gaps and closed the openings in what would eventually become my parents' master bedroom. Al and Nate slept somewhere in the large, main area, while I holed up for the summer in what would become their master bedroom closet. Eight years later, in 2008, when the cottage building project kicked off, the grand house was complete. The joke goes that my parents finally finished their big house in time for all of us to move out. No longer, when we were all gathered, were there lines for the one tiny bathroom, the one that

used to have a composting toilet that I still clearly remember having to step up onto. It was plastic and pale white and mounded up toward the ceiling like some strange space contraption. It was better than the alternative. When the line was too long in that particularly busy stretch of the morning, one of us boys would have to make our way out to the old outhouse with the green Styrofoam seat shaped out of insulation by my father ears before. The foam didn't retain the cold, unlike most every other material.

Chapter 16: Dynamite

It was nice, I remember of the time that I moved up to construct the cottage, seeing my parents enjoying a bit of financial stability, the ability to carry out the building of their dream house, albeit after we were all gone, and some twenty-five years after they would have liked to have been done with it. I've grown somewhat accustomed to the relative luxury of where my parents ended up, but it's easy to recall when times were different. It's not that we were poor in a destitute way as I grew up, and I don't mean to imply any hardships beyond the real ones. There is being poor, and then there is being helpless and foundationless. We were poor, but we had land and opportunity, and, I'm sure, not just a little help from the grandparents on both sides.

Nonetheless, there were two defining events that led to the financial precariousness of my childhood, and maybe even to the embrace of Amway and Christianity in that carpeted convention hall. The first was in the late seventies. My father had several large boats around the yard, and business was beginning to boom. He was in the middle of expanding the boatyard's capacities by dynamiting a launch ramp into the riverside granite, so he could haul and launch sailboats into the river. Back then, apparently, in Maine one could go buy dynamite at will. There was one restriction: one couldn't buy both the dynamite and the "caps" (the detonating part) at the same time. To get around this, my mother, and probably everyone else, purchased the dynamite, drove down the road a few hundred yards, and dropped off the dynamite by the side of the road. Then she'd return to the shop to get the caps and pick up the dynamite on the side of the

road on her way back home: All with my toddler brother Philip sitting, un-carseated, in the back.

I can't resist a note about the car. Back then they drove many a jalopy, but the most notorious was the Pinto. The driver's side door didn't work, and one had to get in and out of the window. It was ailing in many other ways, but apparently it was safe enough to transport dynamite. At least until the frame gave way under the seats and my mother and friend ended up dragging their rears along the pavement one day on their way up town. But for me, the thing that most clearly defines the financial situation of the time was that it was a real special thing for us to be able to go out for a Gatorade or a Coke after baseball games. I remember the little shop down the road from the ball field, and the feeling of the cool Gatorade bottle, lemon-lime flavor, in my hand, and the wonderful taste of that fake sugar and artificial flavoring. Ah. If Michael Jordan drank it, then that was that. There was little or no going out to eat. Everywhere we went my mother brought packed lunches. And the highlight of grandpa Phil's visits was the luxury of McDonalds happy meals, or a Junior Whopper from Burger King.

My father blames the big dynamite incident on our neighbor, Jan White. He and Jan had drilled holes down into the ledge and packed in the dynamite that my mother had carried home in the old Pinto with my brother Philip in the back. At the last minute, Jan insisted that Dad needed more dynamite to do the job. This is where the truth may be hard to separate from the gradual shifts that take place over time, and my father is well known to be a prodigious exaggerator. There was no Google back then to instruct one on the proper ratio of dynamite to ledge. They rolled out the fuse to where they thought was a safe distance and, *bam!* Exaggerations or not, there was plenty of dynamite in the holes.

The ledge took to the air, greying the skies, giving wings to the lichen and seaweed. But it's not the way up that mattered, of course. The pieces of ledge found their way down through the decks of the boats through the floors of the boats and through the hulls of the boats. The ledge wanted to find its way back to its origins, and so it did, irrespective of what lay in the way.

My mother estimates the damage at one hundred thousand dollars, and of course they had no insurance to cover the costs. My father had to work for two years to rebuild what that one blast had undone. No exaggeration that time. The accident devastated the business, needless to say. My mother remembers not being sure, one particular night a few years after the blast and not long after their conversion to Christianity, what she was going to prepare for dinner. She tentatively prayed under her breath to her new god. Just minutes later, a bird flew into the window and dropped dead in front of the house. A neighbor friend helped her pick the feathers out and clean the carcass. Remember: this was the rich girl whom, when she and my father met on a ski slope in Vermont just ten years earlier, had stick-on eye lashes and fake nails.

The blast was a handful of years before my birth, and it was the incident that stalled the building of the new house in its tracks, leaving it as a wonderful castle-like playground for us to grow up around. The second financial devastation, I was old enough to remember. The way I always recall it, true or false, is as an image out of my bedroom window. It's dark, and I've woken to noises in the house, or some sense of something amiss. I look out the window and the door of the boat shop is open, the light from inside formed a triangle of shadows in the outdoors. And the strange thing is that my father is nowhere to be seen. There was not a sound in the house and no one responded to my

calls, not even my mother. But I had a sense of activity, of something of great import happening.

The daughter of our neighbor Jan White, (he of the bad dynamite advice), was babysitting us that night. My mother was gone somewhere. My father, under pressure to complete a big project, (a seemingly endless state of being for him during my childhood), was working late in the shop. It was the repetition on the table saw that got him, that and the bulky glove on his left hand. He was ripping stave stock for custom cedar buckets he made during those years for an upscale nautical jewelry company. The work was repetitive, and he had designed elaborate jigs for the task. During one of the passes he got a little too close, and his glove caught one of the teeth and sucked his hand into the blade. There was no pain but he knew intuitively and immediately the injury was significant. And being alone, far from medical attention in the night, it was best not to look at the wound, lest he pass out. He grabbed a towel and wrapped the hand as tightly as he could. He spotted his pointer finger, intact, on the table saw. He scooped it into the pocket of his hooded sweatshirt then got in the car and drove himself to the hospital, about fifteen minutes away. When he walked in and showed them the wound and the finger, they asked if he'd happen to bring his thumb as well. No such luck.

The curled fingers on his left hand are scared and gnarled, but they're normal to me. The Lebanese blood from his father gave my father's skin the color of scar anyway. It's hard to notice the shortened thumb and forefinger, maybe, because all his fingers have been beaten up and swollen from years of manual labor. The doctors did a hell of a job, at least for 1984. The poor babysitter, Jan White the dynamite guy's daughter, had to

search for the thumb in the bloody sawdust and put it on ice until medics could transport it, and my father, down to Boston for emergency surgery.

I remember the metal-wired-and-foam contraption that the physical therapists gave him to strengthen his fingers after his (how long) in the hospital. It was springy and resisted compression. We used to test our strength against my father's, trying with our whole hands to make it compress. And there was wonderful putty too, thick and shiny, and a dull brown pink, that they gave my father to play with as part of the rehab. He kept it in a flat and circular Styrofoam container on one of the glass shelves of the teak built-in he'd made. The old house was starting to look decent at that point. Before the built-in, the ladder to the second floor was replaced by a spiral staircase, and the crude ceiling had become pleasant-looking cross sections of beams and panels. I guess my parents had accepted by that point that their dream house was going to be a pile of stone ruins for us children to play with. My father cutting off his fingers didn't help.

Chapter 17: Amway Too

The landing at the top of the stairway became my oldest brother Philip's tiny bedroom. It was painted with colorful hot air balloons that were later covered with sports posters.

When one came to the top of the stair, one was standing in Philip's bedroom, and could either turn right and enter into my parent's tiny bedroom (leaning to avoid the slope of the roof if one were an adult), or turn left and enter through no door at all into my room.

In 1982, two years after I was born, my room became our room, as we welcomed little Christopher John Francis into the world. I guess I got used to it, because we shared that room until I moved out, or, rather, was kicked out at seventeen. That was a couple months before my first arrests, and my first rehabs.

The biggest improvement to the little house was the normal toilet that was installed around my tenth birthday. The prerequisite septic system must've been put in too. We'd entered the modern world, though not in the glorious fashion my parents had imagined. At some point around the time that the toilet was installed, the first scale model of the big dream house appeared in the little real house. Made of cardboard and hot glue, it must've been part of my parents' "keeping the dream alive." As they got more and more into Amway, the talk of dreams and goals became more and more frequent. There were Amway-sanctioned positive music tapes and success testimonies in every tape deck. Pictures of fancy new cars were taped to the mirror and magnetted to the fridge. We kids were encouraged to participate in the dreaming, and my parents laid out specific rewards for us in the not too far off future: bikes, horses, go-carts. Amway distributorship is hierarchical. One starts at the base level and works one's way up through being a "direct

distributor,” and then a “ruby distributor,” on through “emerald,” on towards the impossible glory of becoming a “diamond distributor.”

My parents were Rubies. Not bad, though I’m sure it just offset the gas money and the convention fees for all the hustling about that being a driven Amway member requires. I remember being promised four-wheelers and horses if we were to become Emeralds, the idea being to include us kids in the optimism that short term sacrifices for long term gain required. And there indeed were sacrifices.

In my early childhood, and right on through until my teens, my parents were out two or three nights of the week “showing the plan.” This was the phrase that Amway folks used, along with “meeting,” for the process of trying to sell the idea of Amway to a new person. What was the idea? It was simple, really: it all started with soap, though at the time my parents got involved the co-founders of Amway, Rich Devos and Jay Van Andel were the fourth and fifth richest Americans, and Amway was selling pretty much everything one could imagine from laundry detergent to nutritional supplements. It became the ultimate pyramid scheme business, and maybe it still is. The basic idea is that when one signs up, one becomes a “distributor.” That means that one buys products at a certain discounted price and sells them to other people at a slightly higher price, not unlike being a retail store unto oneself. The more volume one sells, the lower the price they get the products for from Amway, and the more profit one makes selling them at discount to others. The idea is to climb the ranks until you have many distributors underneath you and you can sit back, in Florida, with the Mercedes that was once taped to your bathroom mirror, and let the residual income roll in.

Bullshit. My parents put in fifteen years of hard work. At first, they climbed quickly, becoming local leaders in the business, speaking at small functions, and being “active,” as Amwayers called it: trying to sell the pyramid scheme to others. But all those efforts yielded little. There was a fair amount of posturing: older Mercedes with shiny paint jobs, and boundless positivity in the face of the seeming futility of little return on much time spent. At least they learned that one great life lesson, positivity, which certainly helped them in the aftermath of their Amway careers when faced with the reality that they had wasted an epic amount of their adulthood. Along the way they also became great public speakers. This came in handy, when, in 2009, they started a church.

Chapter 18: Babysat

But when I was a kid, I would've liked for them to have been around a bit more, for my brothers and I to spend less of our nights with the daughters of neighbors, and the rest of the endless web of babysitters. There's a painful memory I have of sitting "knee to knee" with my mother during the family week of a sixty day drug rehabilitation program I attended Montana. I was just eighteen, ten years before the cottage building mission of 2008. Both of us were crying as the counselor gently coaxed us through the reparations, and the other family and troubled-son combos sat in a circle around us. She apologized, as the tears welled then rolled down her face, for being gone so much during, especially, my formative years, chasing the Amway dream. I'd never really thought of it like that before. All I remember is the sadness of them leaving out the red door that led to the walkway, crying as the babysitter comforted me. I think Mom may have been out "showing the plan" the night my father cut his fingers off.

In the end, success came not from Amway but in the form of cabins and cottages and the waterfront rental world. The first rental cottage, around 1996, was 12-by-16-foot cabin my father had originally built as a small shingle mill, one of the many business started and ended along the way. They broomed out the cedar and pine grist, put a small loft bed in it and started renting it out, at first to grungy workers from the boatyard, and then eventually to low-budget Maine-coast vacationers.

The final summer of my high school years, Philip, about to finish college, came back and stayed in that little cottage with some friends. They laid out across the tiny floor, and filled up the loft, working odd jobs around the area, landscaping and whatever

else they could find. I was deep into the challenges of becoming an adult: stuck between dependence and responsibility. The foremost memory of that summer and that little converted shingle mill was of waking up in it, covered in my own bright-red vomit and shit, and not being able to tell the difference. I can still see the image of the oddly red intestinal byproduct starkly spread across the dark silvery sleeping bag I had gone to sleep in. My effusiveness was the product of what was called “robotripping,” not nearly as exciting as it sounds, but just as stark. One had to drink an entire bottle of a certain type of Robotussin to get the desired effect of...just feeling strange for several hours, and possibly vomiting and shitting. Ah, how wonderful. I remember conceiving of it like this: “Well, it doesn’t make me feel very good, but it does make me feel different.”

Different, apparently, was what I was shooting for at that point in my life. It’s easy for me to come to grips with some teenager-type behavior like this, as shameful as it was (red vomit everywhere, my brother and his friends looking down on me). It’s harder for me to get my mind around the more insidious behaviors: prowling around while my grandfather lay dying, or, the one that still hurts the most: pawning my mother’s wedding band for \$30 (the going rate for whatever the weight of the meek, little band). I’m not sure if she ever got it back from that pawn shop - I’ve never been able to bring myself to ask. It’s also hard to conceive of the reality that I did many of those types of things again, and again...and even one more time again, this time not a teenager, but a 28-year-old, in 2008.

Soon to follow in the rental fleet, was the “sail loft,” the area above the boat shop where my parents once made an attempt at a sail mending business. It had since become the boat shop’s office. I can remember a hand-painted orange sign a former employee had

made from old piece of dirty plywood that pointed up the stairs with an arrow: “Orifice.”

My father partitioned off the gambrel expanse and put in some big, south-facing windows, painted the rough boards white and started renting it out. Seeing the Amway-promised concept of residual income actually coming into action fired the engines in my mother’s entrepreneurial brain. And my father had all the skills to build it into action.

Soon there were two more small one-bedroom cottages added to the shingle mill and the sail loft. I helped my father build them in the troubled closing years of high school. Two more two-bedroom cottages, all with quaint screened-in porches, were soon added, and financial stability began at last.

Chapter 19: Retrograde

I heard somewhere along the way that Mercury is in a special position in the 28th year of one's life relative to the position it was in at the time of one's birth. Something about it being in retrograde? Or was that something I overheard in another context? I almost don't want to look it up because I've been able to have it tucked away as something of a rich and interesting explanation for some of the challenges I'd undergone in that year of my life. In retrospect, if not in retrograde, I think a strange blend of psychological addictions and residual concussion symptoms drove me into the darkest part of my life. Being an adult, a successful one, I guess, by some standards, maybe sub standards, I figured I'd gone well past the insensible feelings of shattered pain that were the byproduct of deep addiction. Nope.

I was headed for more success too, I projected, by grasping onto my mother's financial scheme to build out the next cottage on the "compound," (as we came to call our 55 acres of waterfront land). I had great faith in the seldom-practiced idea of putting long term gain above short term, having been inculcated into the principles of the Amway fold. Maybe it was exactly the fact that I had so little experience with financial responsibility that made it so appealing, and that it was being handed to me so readily prepared by the knowing hands of my mother, like a breast.

Up to the point of my fall off the roof there had been a spirit of enterprise and renaissance bounding around in my mind and body. I was practicing piano, working on banjo and mandolin. I had applied and been accepted to graduate school to study English Literature at the University of Southern Maine. I had nearly completed getting my

captain's license. I rose early, around five, my head abuzz with ideas for the day, with a nearly constant bluster towards life. I built the cottage during the day, and at night I studied nautical law, with my compass and parallel rule and sharpened pencils laid out on charts. Or I played piano and practiced the mandolin or banjo, letting each instrument's texture draw out of me differing collections of melodies and lyrical ideas. I would go to bed late, midnight or after, with a feeling of having kicked the day's ass, as squarely and stoutly as possible.

And the drugs and booze? Well, I'm not really sure. I was in a strange in-between phase, a user's liminality, a respite. I'd started using again for no particular reason that I am aware of, which is stunning, and says much about my alcoholic brain, given the immensity of pain it had afforded me in the past. It was in my final semester of college, after four years or so of sobriety, three of those faithfully in sober meetings. The spear tip of the relapse was a harmless couple of Heineken at the local pub in Beverly, Massachusetts, called the Rooster, or something like that. Ironically, it was with Nate, my car-crash compadre that I had those first beers. They went down smooth and freely, and the cigarettes we shared afterwards had never tasted so sweet. In the four years between those beers and the three rehabs I went through before the age of nineteen, I fancied, I had grown in so many ways that a drinking experiment would be harmless enough. I told myself, like many addicts before, that this time it would be different. I'd learned so much about life in college, after all: how to read poetry and literature, how to listen to music and be transported to other worlds, how to grapple through the greater levels of philosophy. I knew what was truly of value now, as opposed to my teenager self,

struggling though the swift changes of those years. It would be different this time. I had a degree in philosophy, after all, and one in English Literature.

And I guess it was, for a little while. The sheer mass of the wave of learning and self-expansion I had been riding held back the pharaoh of alcoholism and addiction for a little while. To bring old Uncle Rat the taxidermist back into the story, I think it was his brother or uncle, my grandmother's great uncle who ended his time on this earth with a shotgun in his mouth out in the barn. He was a drinker, I guess. And then there was "grandpa Whitney," as grandma used to call him, my grandmother's grandfather. (His uncle was Eli Whitney, the inventor of the cotton gin). Grandpa Whitney was a binge drinker, starkly opposed to the staunch grandma Whitney. After his bouts with the bottle he would hear no end of it, apparently, from the otherwise terse woman with whom he shared his house, though I'm guessing not his bed. My grandmother remembered hearing them argue one particular time, Grandma Whitney going on and on whilst grandpa Whitney sat red faced and likely a little hung over, taking it all in. He reached a boiling point, though, and despite the presence of my five-year-old grandmother, he stood and yelled: "Shut up, you goddamned shit ass!" The guilty thrill my grandmother must've felt as a little girl was still apparent in her elderly face at this recounting and mirrored the guilty thrill we young boys felt at hearing our grandmother curse, albeit secondhand. We still occasionally call each other "shit ass."

So it's only fair to admit that there's some alcoholic threads among those of genius. And surprisingly, with the significant exception of my Uncle Billy, there's little to no evidence of alcohol abuse on my mother's Irish side.

I limped through my final college semester, hobbled a bit by daily weed use, but thriving and creative nonetheless. The drugs were a nice tool, mixing and firing new sparks into the spirit of human advancement I'd been kindling through my years of education. I've often repeated to myself and others that I didn't just go right back into heavy use like all those curmudgeonly old men in sober meetings said I would (more on these meetings later). I had control. And I guess that was true in one sense. But the only real control I had was being able to function very well while high on weed. I smoked a few times a day, most every day, and what kind of control is that? But I've always tended towards imposing myself upon the world rather than letting the world impose itself upon me. I could've used a few life lessons from my grandmothers about then. They were there, but I just couldn't wrap myself around them at 24 years of age. I'm nearly ten years sober now, so I guess I'm supposed to have a clue. Sometimes I do, but mainly I've learned the valuable life lesson of acting like it.

Chapter 20: Abroad

In 2004, after I graduated from Gordon College, I went on a three-week backpacking trip in Central America with two friends, one of which had been teaching that year in Tegucigalpa, Honduras. Near the end of the trip, I was in San Jose, Costa Rica, outside a KFC of all places, with one of the friends, Kenny. Despite what he likes to think of himself Kenny is straight-laced. We all always agreed that he'd become an investment banker (he has, at State Street in Boston). Maybe we were craving those perfect biscuits, or the novelty of beans and rice and enchiladas had worn off by the third week of the trip. Either way, I'm sure booze was somewhat to blame for us for the choice of eatery.

We'd been in San Jose just one night when my cravings for some weed got the better of my reason. I'd been lusting for a good toke ever since I lost most of my stash the week prior. It sprinkled little by little out my underwear, down my shorts, and onto the ground, while cops looked on. Outside of La Ceiba, Honduras, *la policia* had stopped us on a road near the edges of civilization. We couldn't find the registration for the truck we'd borrowed. We had been visiting the Garifuna villages, small primitive clusters of huts on the northern Honduran coast, and being out there on the fringe of the third world left us feeling exposed and touchy. I'd quickly stuffed my flimsy baggie of weed into my underwear and wished I were still a briefs man, but they were out of style by then, in those pre-American Apparel days. As the cops deliberated in Spanish about the prospect of extorting a couple of gringos driving a truck around the northern coast of Honduras, I tried my best to clench my thighs together and still look natural, not an easy feat. I could feel the baggie working its way open in my crotch. I looked down and saw the little green

buds trickling out of my shorts and down in between my toes and flip flops. I kept kicking my toes around to make it disappear, but that didn't help the stability of the bag in my underwear. Eventually we found the registration in a hidden compartment in the truck and the police let us on our way—us, minus my stash of weed.

The forthright point for this story is that I had been without my sacred crutch for some days when a young man approached me outside of the KFC and asked if I needed any weed. There is a strange action in the addict's brain, and you'd think by then I would've known it for what it was. I've heard it called a "mental blank spot," a "built-in forgetter," or a "curious mental twist." Somehow, it seemed like a great idea to follow this young man off into the streets and leave Kenny at the KFC with a "What the hell?" look on his face.

The young man I followed out into the streets of San Jose was called Carlos. With his perfect jawline, rich skin and gentle, artistic eyes, he resembled a young Bob Marley. I felt a bond grow quickly between us, delusional or not, as he told me about his being deported from America on minor drug charges. The walk was longer than I liked, a mile at least, and a mild nervousness crept over my skin. It was dark. I was in San Jose. Kenny waited at the KFC. What was I doing walking through the night (*How long had we been walking?*) with a total stranger?

I remember the stairwell being lit from the top, somewhere beyond my vision. It opened onto the street, with no door on the bottom. It looked dingy, but only so dingy, and I was already too far in to turn back. The last step at the bottom of the stairway led straight out to the sidewalk. I envision there being a bit of dew forming in the night air and darkening the sidewalk, but I'm not sure if my mind has added this later for dramatic

effect. I hesitated slightly befogging steeping up. By the time I looked up and saw the man with a gun behind a gate at the top of the stairs, I was a few steps up, and there was no changing course. The whole experience, as I'm writing, feels like some metaphor for my addicted life. Led along, some potential reward or desire fulfilled off in the murky distance. Walking past sign posts that clearly marked the dangers of the streets ahead, but by some magical twist of interpretation, I was able to view the danger as exciting, and killing myself as really living.

The fenced door at the top of the stairs was yellow and dark orange, freshly painted. I stood in the stairway. Carlos and the man argued away, non-violently but with some force and attitude. Eventually, though no longer a good thing in my mind, we were let in. I followed Carlos into a room directly to the right at the top of the stairs. The right wall of the stairwell was one wall of the room, though only about six and half feet tall, leaving an opening of about a foot and a half between the wall and the ceiling. Inside the room, the paint was falling off the plaster. A ring of human beings crouched against the walls. I sat down on the one old mattress and Carlos told me he'd be back shortly. I knew right away from the general sense of decrepitude and the various paraphernalia scattered about that I was in a crack house of some sort. The crackheads didn't pay me much attention. They were fine with the gringo there amongst them, having other things – one thing, really – on their minds. As I waited for Carlos, one crackhead or another would spontaneously sprawl forward onto all fours and, soon, joined by the others, parse through the worn hairs of the rug examining tiny specks of white. Then, satisfied or not, they would slowly retreat back to the walls and their seated positions. There was no anger or edge left in them. They seemed soulless.

Carlos returned with my small bag of weed, and we smoked a joint there in the room of crackheads. Then he pulled from his coat a foil packet with a white rock of crack in it, and a pipe. He smoked the rock and shared with some of the others in the room. It was strangely peaceful and quiet. There was no threat left in them or their movements, nothing jerky or menacing. I almost felt comfortable there. When he offered the pipe to me, I took it.

Crack is high among the most addictive of substances because the lungs are the quickest pathway to the blood streams of the body, quicker even than shooting up into a vein. You can only shoot into one vein, but when you breathe in crack it passes into the whole bloodstream just like the oxygen the blood carries out of the lungs. I got high fast. The taste was bitter but not as unpleasant as the smell, which was acrid and dusty. Almost immediately a feeling of airiness spread across my skull, like one big goose bump in my brain. The chemicals of meaningfulness swept through my brain and I felt great solidarity with the others in the room. Carlos and I became almost tender with each other. I kept thinking “He looks as handsome as a young Bob Marley.”

Whatever we talked about, it had a feeling of depth and lasting quality, of a relevance, pure and tangible, in a crack house in San Jose. I remember looking at him affectionately, feeling the feeling of human bond that I’ve always craved. I still see a young Bob Marley when I try to picture Carlos now. But instead of a spliff, he had a crack pipe in his mouth.

I asked him about his family, and he asked about mine. We were both careful with each other, leaving time for the other to speak, asking questions, and enjoying whatever the answers were—like I’d always imagined love was supposed to be like. But the story

doesn't end there. In a metaphor for my drinking and drugging career, the feeling of love I shared with Carlos didn't last. It was interrupted by shouting and commotion in the stairway, on the other side of the thin wall I had my back against, the wall that stopped a foot and a half from the ceiling and opened up onto that stairwell. The crackheads, prostitutes and I were suddenly very quiet. Everyone swept away from the center of the room and sat with their backs to the peeling walls. Carlos alone stayed on the bucket he was sitting on near the center of the room. He motioned to me for silence, whispering: "Police."

I saw who I took to be the man in charge of the crack den come swiftly to the gated entryway, his gun drawn. The guard had his gun out too and was circling the entrance area. There seemed to be four or five policemen in the stairwell now, and any one of them could've reached out a hand, if the wall weren't there, and grabbed me by the balls.

The shouting and the gun toting persisted for thirty-five minutes or so, swelling in and out of control. My heartbeat, urged on by the crack, was high and steady. I kept thinking: "What would they do to a little gringo if they found him here?" The act played out, and the right amount of money was agreed, and the cops went away. The crackheads relaxed, and Carlos did, too. I was the only one still tense. The crackheads went back to their intermittent floor searches and Carlos got high again. But the spell was broken for me and I couldn't get back into the feeling I'd had before of everything, absolutely all of it, being the way it should be.

Seeing the world, like Christians do, as a battle between good and evil, the angels and the demons swirling around to protect you or defeat you, makes a lot of sense. I often

think that it's no wonder the spiritual world is conceived like this. My experience in the crack house felt that way: of grand, eternal import, with a dead-locked battle for my soul playing out in the ether surrounding Carlos and I. I left that dark room, walked down the stairwell and back out into the streets. But many others didn't, and it's hard to see it as any fault of their own. It's easy to assign life victories to triumphs of the human will, not so much the failures. And in the throes of addiction it's impossible to tell the demons from the angels, some with horns and wings both.

I don't remember parting with Carlos, whether we hugged or not. I don't remember the horrible feeling of coming down that night, or the fast heart beating and sleeplessness that must have ensued. I know they did because four years later, in 2008, I started smoking crack for real—or at least the version of it one can make up with some cocaine, baking soda, water, a spoon, a lighter, and a little piece of metal like a paper clip to move it all around with.

Chapter 21: The Itch

The cottage was proceeding, things were warming up. It was 2008 and I was 28. I'd even started a tempestuous relationship with an older woman—a certain rite of passage for a young adult male. I'd met her before, somewhere with someone. And I knew she was the barmaid at this one particular retro Mexican place called El Camino, not far south from my folks' peninsula. The restaurant was painted a distinct orange, and the walls were prodigiously fitted with mirrors, hub caps, ancient Christmas lights and the dried sprigs of flowers of unrecognizable genus. When I opened the door that night, she seemed to have been waiting for me. A spark leapt over the bar, our eyes locked, and it was on. And then it was off. And then it was on. You see, she'd met another “incredible” man just before that night I walked into the bar (He *was* incredible, too. I met him a couple months later, and had to tip my hat to him, having fairly lost the battle for my older woman's heart. They have a child together now, about the same age as my daughter).

And why is it that, for some, the proximity of potential loss drives the desire to hold on? But I'm sure it didn't work that way for my Grandmother Lewella, nor my Grandmother May. No, there must've been a hidden fire in the genetic code passed down through the male line, a dormant itch. And an itch is what I've come to view this seed of discontentment forever slouching just behind the lights burning within me. I'm curious to see if science unlocks the substance of the itch that drives addiction. Is it a split helix in the genome, or a missing bacterium in the gut biome? Whatever it is, I have it - or don't have it, as the case may be. And Heather prodded it with her full lips and vintage skirts and fluttering shiny eyes.

And it was Heather I thought of immediately as I came to after falling off the roof and onto the cottage job site's accumulating pile of scrap lumber. I didn't even really come to. I was never unconscious. And I certainly wasn't in pain. I was blissed out. I felt something click over in my brain, a twinge of some different blood flow passages opening or closing or rerouting, similar to the strange feeling one sometimes has upon awaking when paths of the subconscious and the conscious are still blending, and staking out their territory for the day. And, yes, there were stars, definitely stars.

I'd been roofing the cottage's master bedroom wing a little too fast, as I do most things. The staging plank I was working from extended a little too far out over the roofing bracket that was holding it, and as I rushed to lay down another course of asphalt shingles I stepped out onto the edge of the plank. It flipped up and dumped me down the roof and onto the scrap wood pile. The distance was probably twelve feet, and when the plank tilted I went sideways and hit my head pretty hard.

My father and the handful of other workers busy in the final weeks of the cottage construction came rushing over, but I paid them no mind. I was thinking of Heather and there was a feeling of pleasurable immensity over my body. They helped me up slowly, and the blood seemed to return to its normal flow within the brain. I was back again out of the concussive fog, pulling off the shores of Heather, wherever she was. It felt like I had been with her. It was a good fall, as falls go, I thought. I had a bruised wrist and a strange cranial reaction, and that was it.

But two days later, I found out the real power of concussions. I was sitting in a first aid certification course I needed to complete in order to fulfill my boating captain's license requirements. We were learning all of the various techniques of resuscitation and

wound suppression. The instructor's name was Tom, and he had a hearty moustache. As I listened to Tom, in an instant, the whole room went whoosh, and my blood pressure pounded to full capacity through my arms, as they numbed, and into my legs, as they went dead. Some fundamental fear rippled over my skin, like I knew I was about to die. The fearful power of the sensations overwhelmed my instinct to avoid the awkwardness of verbalizing what was happening. Tom handled it professionally, as one would expect of a first aid instructor. He did the basic CPR tests on me, and an ambulance was called. My heart rate was around 150 beats per minute and it seemed to pound all over my body. At the hospital, the proximity to medical attention calmed me a bit, but it wasn't until after all tests came back normal and gave me valium that I really settled down. A panic attack, the doctor explained.

Up to that point in my life I'd never had a physical symptom of nervousness. Now, I wear them on my sleeve, though I've learned to wear long-sleeved shirts. It's been ten years, but that feeling of terror from that first panic attack never really left me. There have been periods of antidepressants along the way, and some help from valium, too. Oh valium. For months after I stopped taking it I carried one in my wallet, just in case. Anxiety is like that. It's 80 percent anticipatory and ten percent the real thing. The other ten percent is who the hell knows, but it's there and ready to slip down into place.

I suppose something jarred when I fell, some bruising that fucked the circuitry in my head. I've had as my companion these last ten years a certain buzzing up there that never really does stop. And when I'm overachieving, or being unmindful in my labor, multi-tasking, the buzzing turns electric, like there are frayed wires splaying around and spitting sparks in my forehead.

For the first month or so of my new life condition, to still my brain, I worked hard at yoga a good habit I'd picked up in my weed smoking final year at college. I wept with my parents as they prayed their prayers over me in the kitchen. We hugged, and the emotions pounded hard and true, as if they'd found their origins. I went to the bar and told Heather everything. She came clean about the other man in the picture, then took me back to her place. I should've made love to her then. But I didn't. There was some purity of feeling it would have belied. We never kissed again.

Working was the perfect antidote to the buzzing. As long as I kept moving, the buzzing had direction. But when I stopped and went home and lay down, it was there waiting for me. I lost the ability to sit still. I cancelled dinner reservations. I'd eat with my parents and usually would have to get up in the middle and wander off—just to keep the fear at bay. The buzzing did lend itself to finishing the cottage, though, which was completed on June 26, 2008, the day before the first renters showed up. My father has a saying on his wall: "If it weren't for the last minute, nothing would ever get done around here."

I'm sure my parents and others thought that my new unhinging was drug related; they've admitted as much in the years since. But it wasn't. By that point, at 28 years old, my drug use had distilled to almost nothing. In my later twenties I could no longer handle the effects of weed. It was more anxiety than chillaxing when I did smoke, and that was with tiny little puffs. Sure, there were flashes of hard drug use tucked in here and there, the occasional psychedelic employed at a festival or a night out at a show, but the business of life kept a tight hold on me. As long as I had a cigarette tucked in my mouth, life was okay.

But that changed after my panic attack. Everything changed. After work each day, as soon as I stopped, the buzzing began, with all its tinges of madness. It wasn't long before I gave in to the remedy of booze. It worked incredibly well, a few beers being sufficient to knock the hum out of my brain. Why the body builds up tolerance, I'm not sure. It's strange, really. A couple beers became a six pack, and so on. I'd moved down to Boston again, trying to dig back in to my former, pre-cottage life. The buzzing followed me, and intensified. I remember one night, waking up after the booze had worn off, in a deep terror. It felt like the happy chemical in my brain had dried up, or suddenly been flushed down the wrong tube. And this started happening with frequency. It wasn't long before, in one of my nighttime terrors, I went and grabbed a bottle. A few swigs did the trick, and I was back to sleep.

I started seeing a psychiatrist who prescribed Prozac and led me through weekly psychotherapy sessions. I probed the base of the fear I was experiencing, trying to pry around the edges of it to get a grip. There were small breakthroughs, rushes of elation as I discovered things—things like how much music really meant to me, how through it I could feel the world the way I wanted to. But in the end the terror binding me was material, and the mental revelations didn't translate into the physical realms. The electricity in my head felt like demons, and my angels didn't like the hum.

The buzzing became a pounding, a feeling of nearly maniacal insanity waiting in the wings of my life. I was afraid I would drop off the cliff into it and never rise again. It got so bad one evening that I called my brothers Chris and Philip who lived nearby and drove out to meet me. We sat in the garage with a bottle of Don Julio tequila and cigarettes, next to the trash cans. I did most of the smoking and drinking...and crying. I

cried and cried and told them how afraid I was. It felt like my mind was in some demon's control, as if there'd been a spiritual mutiny within my own body and soul.

I started on more and different prescription happy pills. The psychiatrist described the process of a panic attack as being almost exactly like I'd pictured it: a steep and swift dip in serotonin levels. These pills, he'd said, would at least keep my chemicals in balance enough so that the serotonin could only go so low. Only so low; that sounded nice to me.

Chapter 22: Morning Drink

My friends and I, along with Chris and his wife, made a plan to move back to Maine and test out a semi-communal living situation. My parents had the cottages, after all, and we were all still youngish and flexible. Thus, in September 2008, three months after finishing the cottage, I was back in Maine. My life came apart at the seams, and then all over. I was waking up at least once a night, fear gripping me. Again, I turned to the bottle, usually a nice tequila, like Patron or Don Julio. And then I was up in the morning with the fear all over again, and even work wouldn't shoo it away. I'd have a drink in the morning, maybe with a splash of orange juice for good measure. I started being a somewhat regular customer up at the gas station liquor store at 8 a.m., just like in the stories I'd heard repeated in sober meetings I'd once attended. Pain-drink-more-pain-more-drink-therapy-drink-rock-bottom. I was still on the happy pills, or something like it, as well as a steady though controlled flow of valium. The psychiatrist kept a tight eye on me, as I'm sure he'd seen and listened to my type before. It's hard to even write those word, ten years sober, the deadly urge to cry out to the world of my particularity is so strong in me. In sober meetings I've heard it called "terminal uniqueness." And I guess I am special, but not in my addictions. Luckily in my ten years of sobriety I've had plenty of addiction test results from my personal experiments with tobacco. They've all come back resoundingly positive. Control just isn't in my DNA when it comes to things that make me feel good, albeit short term. The closest I've come to balance is in pitting opposing excesses against each other: smoking and being a juicing vegan or vegetarian, running and smoking. I've endured much mockery for being a smoking vegetarian. But

why is that strange? Is it better to be a smoking junk food eater? No. And anyway, it was the best version of balance I could get to.

But all that fell apart when the anxiety came in. In that five months stretch from when I fell off the roof to when we all moved back to Maine, there was hardly a respite. And the scales tipped hard against me when I started drinking in the night and early morning. At that point the solution started adding to the problem. The dehydration and mental decay from alcohol fueled whatever the fall had deranged in my brain. I became erratic and started having grey-outs and blackouts. I could get drunk as many as three or five times a day.

The painful mirror I look back with now is one held by Chris' first born, Lewella. She was just a little over one year old at that time, and had some access to my heart that I didn't feel again until I had my own first born daughter eight years later. I adored her. She smoothed out my edges and made me laugh. She brought me into her orbit whenever I saw her. I would get down on my knees to be with her, to play and to laugh. But I once almost dropped her when I'd been drinking. I know Chris saw it, though he didn't say anything at the time. In a very real way she was a tiny anchor pinning my impending insanity to something stable. And I almost dropped her.

In September or October of that year I hit my first bottom--at least my first bottom in adulthood. It didn't take but a couple of weeks of drinking nearly around the clock to totally destroy my insides. My mother came to be with me in the little sail loft apartment above the boat shop while I detoxed on the cheap blue pull-out couch. She came to me, and I'm not sure what words were used, but I knew why she was there and the sadness in her was written all over her face. I couldn't keep boozing like that a secret.

Over the course of the coming days, as the alcohol left my body, I shook and sweated on the sofa. I don't think my mother left my side. I remember clutching my chest and tucking my chin in tight to my fists, and rolling over and over, back and forth, the addict's self-massage. In my more than a thousand sober meetings, I'd heard plenty of stories of the sweats and the shakes, and they came back to me with force in that moment. I'd also heard many stories in AA about guys and gals who went back out after years of sobriety, only to end up worse than ever. I never considered that it could happen to me.

The couple of days on that couch were not pretty. And there's something about going through it all with your mom. Having a child now, I can better imagine what my mother went through. It must've been like a strange and twisted repeat, (twenty-eight years later), of her holding me as a child while I was curled up and sick. I don't remember any lectures or prayers, though I'm sure she was elevating many up to the heavens. She just sat there and held me and rubbed my back while the buzzing persisted and the booze exorcised from my bones.

The human body is incredible in adapting and changing and mine is a decent one, for it endured much more than that detox in the months to come. I didn't get sober until December 31st of that year, and it took a good deal more slapping around at the hands of booze and drugs, and even more work from my poor mother.

Chapter 23: Powdery

She was used to the extra work though, I guess. She says that after Philip, with his peaceable manner, she was not ready for the effort required to raise me. At the library, Philip would sit and read a book in the spot where she'd put him. I would disappear and climb the stacks. Philip did end up with the tiny blip of a DUI at 16, and a few wayward relationship travails, but other than that he continued in his well-mannered being right through most of his life. All A's, and then a 4.0 gap in college, a three-year master's in divinity, a master's in theology, and, to top off his impossible-to-follow footsteps, a PhD at Harvard. Well done, bro! Asshole. No, not really. The four years between us kept us safely apart. And I never had any weird brotherly jealousy, despite the stereotypical reasons I might feel so. Oh the brothers. Even my wildly "artistic" eldest, Ernie, himself a one-time prodigious drug user, had to step in with concern and mini interventions in those final months of my drug use.

I'd done cocaine before, a good amount of times - several handfuls at least. Cocaine makes the whole of the world and everyone in it wildly interesting. Everything gets imbued with meaning, and around every corner and in every set of eyes the secrets of the universe are revealing themselves. That, and one has boundless energy with which to explore them! I loved it, of course, it giving to me the keys to the meaning of the world that I'd always craved. With cocaine, the real world became aligned with the ones I'd pictured during my youthful forays into my deep imagination.

But cocaine had always remained far removed from my social circle, and getting it had always been just enough hassle to twinge some inner conscience away from doing

so. Cocaine dealer are rightly suspicious by nature and skeptical of all users, and buying a bag of powder is nothing like the relatively chill experience of acquiring a bag of green buds. It's also expensive, costing \$80 for a good night....and morning.

I first did a rail when I was sixteen up in the bedroom I shared with Chris. My best friend Josh had a troubled cousin who'd brought some over. I'm not sure I remember the feeling of it, but we smoked some too, and the occasion made enough of an impression that my challenged brain remembers. That troubled cousin consequently went on to a troubled and short life. He pulled a gun on some cops during an altercation and met his end.

By sixteen, I'd also done crystal meth. What many parents fail to realize when trying to manage the care of boisterous and addiction-prone teens is that when you put them into special programs or unique summer camps or growth conferences, they are going to see other lovely and devious teenagers with whom they can compound their lesser sides. It was at one such camp, in Colorado, that I met a long-haired kid from the Midwest. I'm not sure I'd ever even heard of crystal at that point, but he had, a suggested that I'd love it. Together we walked around park in Manitou Springs asking sketchy looking people if they knew where we could find some. It didn't take long. It's funny, I don't even remember the feeling of it, the good or the bad. We snuck out of the camp that night and roamed up into the nearby hills with sleeping bags and that small white bag. It was at the base of Pike's Peak, one of Colorado's 14,000+ mountains rising up out of "The Garden of the Gods," a valley of golden red boulder plopped down and spread out as if from on high. The stars were brilliant, and I imagine we must've stared at them all

night. But here the mental smoke screen of time and the blinders of an impaired brain shutter my memory.

It was ten years before I did meth again, this time in New York City with my lover/Burning Man companion. I remember clearly the 24 hours of ecstasy, roaming the streets, shopping for Lucky Jeans, dancing in Central Park, making love like angels on the bedroom floor of her small Park Slope apartment. And I sure as hell remember the come down, the look of fear and paleness on my lover's face, and the feeling of having been poisoned that persisted for nearly two weeks.

The special teen educational thingie where I first tried crystal meth was a "Christian leadership week" at an institute for young Christian adults. Paired to my deviance with the long-haired kid, there was the pastor's daughter from Kentucky. Oh, the cliché about those pastor's daughters is well earned. I had another "first" with her on the concrete buttressing of a bridge over a rushing mountain river, after sharing a bottle of Southern Comfort she'd coaxed a man to buy for us outside a liquor store. She was the first girl I'd ever seen wear low-rise jeans. Since then they've bloomed into style and have worked their way back out of it. They'll be back.

Chapter 24: Cook It

I don't even remember the occasion of my first cocaine use after my fall and panic attack in 2008, but I do remember the feeling. There's a reason why Freud and others pioneered cocaine use as a depression treatment before it was denuded to its current uses. I know it healed some of my broken circuitry. Even after the come down, and the terrors of lying in bed with a stinging nose and a pounding heart, I felt as if something had changed in my brain, something, at last, that cooled the engines of my mind and brought it just a smidge closer back to how it was before the fall. So, after that night, whenever and wherever that was, I chased cocaine with the vigor of—well, a cocaine addict.

I remember clearly the night I learned how to cook cocaine into smokable form. I'd slowed down on the booze since the detox with my mother in my little sail loft above the boat shop. I had moved back into that apartment in the fall of 2008 when we set out to experiment with community-style living. The leaves that time of year around the brackish tidal river start donning reds and yellows, giving up their final colors of life before hibernation. My tall, lanky Texan friend Ross and I were doing lines of cocaine and making music up in my little sail loft. Ross is the type of guy who's seemingly done everything, from being a documentary photographer in Mali to fabricating gigantic metal art installations at Burning Man. One gets suspicious when listening to him talk. I always wanted to sit him down and get the chronology of his life straight. Like, "You did this for five years, and then that for ten years, and then that for three years, and how old are you? How is that possible?" I'd met him at Burning Man in 2006 and have an enduring image of him in Speedos, a pink tutu on and a clown nose. But that night he was in street

clothes, so to speak, and we'd been doing rails for hours when the idea of smoking crept to the surface of the conversation. Two addicts together have a sly way of broaching the subject of getting more drugs or trying something new. It's a sort of feigned casualness that is nothing like the burning urge that it expresses. Ross and I maneuvered our way around the idea of smoking cocaine, as if it didn't matter much to either of us. The foregone conclusion was eventually agreed upon, the baking soda was found, a nice spoon, a paperclip and a lighter, and off we went.

I felt as if I'd been given the key to some devious and wonderful new world. Finally, I had a new power--a super power for an addict: I could smoke cocaine! The smoke comes hot into the lungs, and there's a little pause when the breath is held in, a pungent flavor fills the mouth. And then the exhale and an almost stupefied and luxurious buzzing. It's so glorious a sensation that it's hard to write about, to re-experience, such an abnormally euphoric feeling.

In October of that fall 2008 I developed my own connection with a cocaine dealer. I tagged along with a friend on his way to get blow and made sure to make an impression on the dealer: like I had money to spend casually, bought lots of blow, but wasn't addicted (of course), or likely to call him at five am, begging and pleading for more. I got his number, though I pretended as if the scrap of paper with digits on it didn't mean all that much to me. At last!

There were no longer the limits of needing a middle man to temper my cocaine use.

The dealer connection, the fact that I was smoking it now, and the miraculousness that cocaine worked on my addled and buzzing brain blended with my addict's personality to lay down a path to perdition. I had a buddy who used to front me large

quantities of organic bubble hash, a brown film of potent marijuana extract vacuum-sealed into plastic . Unfortunately for me, and him, the cocaine dealer couldn't get enough of the stuff. A good cocaine dealer knows not to front cocaine (to give some to a user with the promise of later payment), the substance being powerful enough to warp the resolve of even the most disciplined wills. Normal people will often act like addicts when it involves cocaine. It's the come-down that does it. The happy chemicals slip off into the shadows, seemingly gone forever, and you know that they'll come back with just one more bump. Of course, they get more and more tentative as the night wears on, keeping their backs to the walls and not dancing with quite the joy they did in the first hours. Soon the bump gets you only back to normal. But normal is just fine at that point compared to the strange and sweeping sadness that a cocaine come-down entails. So I found a way to get fronted cocaine. I would be fronted the bubble hash, and then, in turn, trade that for cocaine, in the thousands of dollars-worth.

When I had blocks of cocaine like that there was no stopping myself. I remember clearly walking away from the dealer with my first big load: four ounces, each a chalky block of white powder wrapped in plastic. The feeling of having no limits welled up inside my ribs. The blocks were dense, but if you prodded them with a knife they split and chalked, and after coaxing with a razor, became a fine white powder, somehow fluffy and crystallized at the same time. I broke one up into smaller pieces to take with me, and left the other three in a small locked cupboard in my apartment.

For an addict like me, a night of cocaine use usually ends only when the irrevocable reality of not having any more come crashing down. You can get one more bag at five am, any good cocaine dealer being still awake and in business at that time, but

nine am is another matter. But having this much cocaine removed those limits, and I had to play games with my inner addict. I would spread it out into little baggies throughout the sail loft apartment, hiding them well enough so that I wouldn't be able to find them all in the moments of desperate come-down, but so that I *would* be able to find them the next day when I was a tad bit clearer. But mostly I would spend hours and hours searching around the apartment, trying to think like my cleverest self. I was like some Scandinavian *tomte*, the scary type of gnome, not the sweet one, scurrying around at night with my little baggies.

I wasn't exactly making money at this time either, though getting all of the cocaine for "free" (as very short-term thinking would have it—mostly what I was engaged in around this time), helped to keep me afloat. My bank account would soon dry up just like the rest of my body and my soul.

And to the world around me, I was getting smaller. That was the real telltale. I was shrinking. Sunglasses can hide the will, bugged out eyes. But the sheer caloric burn of being awake and high and active for so long was way too much to balance out with food intake. I did try my best with the occasional late-night bowl of Ben and Jerry's ice cream to cool the burning in my sinuses and throat. I couldn't force myself to eat anything else. No amount of flavors or fats were up to the task of the deeper cravings I was trying to satisfy.

My brother Chris says he watched me bend over once to help him move a chair and he could see my ribs clearly through my shirt. For him that was the sad moment where he knew I was in trouble, maybe too far gone. It's not like that level of drug abuse can be kept secret for very long. There's no way. He'd tried to help me in his own way,

but there's an insurmountable pedestal that keeps an older brother above a younger,
especially the closer the proximity in ages, two years for Chris and I.

Chapter 25: High Note

It wasn't all bad. I was still an artist, and the drive for creative pursuits was strong in me on those long nights of coke. In my apartment above the boat shop I had converted the dining room table, which looks out onto the river, into a music studio. I had my computer, a keyboard, and a rack of harmonicas, with my grandfather Lewellyn's guitar hanging on the wall next to my beat up, cream-colored, American made Fender Stratocaster. Under the table was a rack of guitar foot pedals and a plastic bin full of percussion instruments: tambourines, egg shakers and bells.

I loved nothing more than to get high and make music. At that point, at 28, I'd been writing songs for fifteen years. It had been the one constant in my life. From those first months with the Beatles Anthology piano book all the way to my present broken self, I'd never stopped writing songs. There was hardly a day when I didn't start off with black coffee, a cigarette and a guitar in hand, working out the lyrics to a song I'd started the night before, or probing the nascent state of my just-awoken consciousness for some fresh melody.

In the weeks after the near fatal accident coming home with Al and Nate from the wedding in New Hampshire, Jesse (the jazz pianist) and I made good on our idea to start a band.

We found a bassist, Ryan Mays, an eccentric and genius of a philosophical mind whose brain far out-paced his mouth. He dressed like a lazy punk, forgoing the jewelry and letting his mohawk droop off to one side or the other of his head in a bright blonde wisp. We added the guitarist Rick Telop, equally eccentric though more circumspectly

so, with hardened cabinet-maker finger and one of the best hand-rolled cigarette makers I'd ever. He played a beautiful green and black Les Paul Jr. electric guitar in our band, though he was finishing his degree in classical guitar. He strummed with picks on all of his fingers, an unusual combination for a rock n roll guitarist. Chris, my younger brother had moved down to live with me near the college we were attending soon after the car crash. He became our drummer, having taken lessons in high school and having by that time the perfect mop of straight and long sandy blonde hair to fit the part. We took the name "The Brakemen" from a 1965 Dylan song off of "Highway 61 Revisited."

We played entirely original songs that I'd written, rambling and lyric-driven at that point in my life, propelled by my passion for Dylan, my teenage drug use, and a deep and mystical faith in God. The title track off of our first album "Nobody Walks There" has lyrics like: "The priest took me out to the waters at the edge of the town, I crossed myself thrice and he plunged me down. When I came up I was alone. I've only seen one thing of beauty in all of my years: the lines on the face of a child torn by tears. She wept there alone."

I remember Dylan, in the early 2000's being interviewed about his burst of creativity in the sixties. He said something to the effect that his brain was working in another realm, wholly apart and beyond from what he was capable of presently. I can relate to that. If not up in Dylan's realm, mine was at least in some place apart from the normal. I was making connections across regions, tying disparate images to concepts freely and fluidly. The song "I've been Down Before" closed out our first album, and no doubt still stands as one of my greatest songwriting and performing achievements.

"When I go I'll shake the dust out of my hair. I can't see the lamb's blood on your door.

But don't you worry about me, this heart don't belong to you no more. I've been down before."

The title line "I've been down before" repeats in the chorus and at the song's end. I'll never forget the first time we played it live. It was in a small bar in Cambridge called The Kendall Café. At that time one could still smoke in bars and the room was full of it as we closed our set with the song. At the end the instruments slowly receded away from the lyrics, the whole band singing the refrain along with me. Little by little the audience started singing it too, until that was all that was left: voices filling the room, singing, over and over, "I've been down before."

I'd made a gospel album for my mother in those nights of heavy abuse, and it's beautiful. The desperation came through the music and my voice and lent a genuineness to the music. There was a starkness in it that I still love. Being so high and internally collapsed brought me to the perfect space for singing words like: "As the dear panteth for the water, so my soul longeth after thee."

I'd honed my banjo and mandolin skills while getting high, and learned a new recording program. It's challenging to remember what one learns on cocaine, but the ability, while high, to maintain focus for endless hours on end more than balances the equation. The vision I had of a great night of drug using was being by myself surrounded by music instruments, making music. But of course the creativity would make up a tiny fraction of the binges, and by the end of them there was no spirit left in me from which to draw.

Chapter 26: Chemistry 101

To smoke cocaine one first has to make it smokable. The powder won't do. The method I learned is called freebasing. First you add the powder to a spoon and then a little baking soda. Something in the baking soda helps the process chemically, though I never did get exactly why, and I'm too timid now, (with the NSA everywhere), to Google it. After the baking soda you add water to the mixture and swirl it all together. Then a flame is applied to the underside of the spoon and the whole thing begins to gel and bubble. A cloudy film starts to float and form on the top, and this is the stuff you want. With a paperclip you can pull the filmy stuff together until it coalesces. Then the lighter goes off and the liquid begins to cool, and the good stuff can be skimmed from the top with a steady hand. When it's removed from the heat it hardens into crystal flakes. Magic.

But you can't just smoke it like that. If you put the crystal flakes into a pipe and apply a lighter they melt and suck into the pipe. It's best to use cigarette ashes. I would collect mine in a little Altoids tin, a portable ash tray I carried in my pocket. I would scoop a teaspoon of ash into my pipe and then place a crystal on top. Then when I applied the lighter the flakes would goo and burn in the ash without sucking through. That's how you smoke cocaine. At least that's how Ross, my tall lanky Texan friend, taught me to do it that night in the sail loft apartment above the boat shop. It's amazing the attentiveness and all-of-a-sudden focus that an addict is capable of, when, however many hours of sleeplessness later, he is called upon to perform the task of freebasing cocaine.

Chapter 27: Awake

My father is stubborn and strong, and like most everybody else, I have some father issues. He was never mean, but he had a temper that got the better of him. I remember one particular dinnertime experience in the old house. The three of us boys were feeling the spirit of the giggles upon us, so that when it came time to say grace we didn't stand a chance. Repeatedly we burst out laughing as my father grew redder and redder. That one ended in some yelling, and all of us sent up to bed supperless. There was a more memorable occasion when his anger overcame him. This one was Christmas Eve, and I must've 10 years old, Philip 14, and Chris 8. And I wonder if it, too, revolved around us unable to stop laughing. I think my mother and father were trying to start some new Christmas Eve tradition, giving a special reading or some such thing. And we three kings were having none of it. Maybe it's the irony of our laughter driving my father to anger that makes these memories sticky. My father sent us all up to bed with or without spankings. And on his way out of our bedroom he put his fist through the wall. I don't remember what Christmas morning was like.

His anger mellowed in his older age, but I do think there was another hole that had to be patched in our bedroom along the way. From my last week of drinking and drugging, the days after Christmas of 2008, I have a much more tender image of my father. He'd torn his Achilles running for a football pass that Chris had tossed the month before. He had a cast on. Surgery for the Achilles had slowed him down quite a bit, and at sixty-three he was showing his first signs of vulnerability. I'm sure he was feeling it too, because you could see a touch of mortality in his handsome, wrinkle-less face.

For their fortieth wedding anniversary that December 28th, my parents had plans to go to Vienna to dance the Venetian waltz. They'd even taken dancing lessons before the Achilles incident. Instead, we brothers cobbled together a celebration for them held in the great room of the new house. I was in charge of music and a slide show. It was more responsibility than I could handle at that point. There's still pain in my gut writing this, even ten years later. I passed out from exhaustion in the middle of the slide show, one particular slide staying put until they realized I'd passed out, and someone roused me. I'm sure there was a pall over the entire celebration, and I was the pall, the anvil weighing down the family, sucking the life out of the love in the room. By that point, my massive beard, hanging three inches down from my chin spreading out under my ears, was the only thing hiding the gauntness in my face, and the yellow-tinted glasses I'd taken to wearing the only things shielding access through the portal to my worn-thin soul.

Earlier in December, I'd stayed up four nights straight doing blow, smoking it, snorting it, whatever, and inhaling endless cigarettes. I'd also collected quite the array of pills to balance out the uppers. There was Valium to come down on, and even some heavy painkillers to balance out the jitters. I'd slowly worked my way toward the sort of concoction that kills. And I'd decided that the best way to avoid the hell of coming down off of cocaine was to just keep doing it until the body passed out. On Day Five, my brother Chris came up to the loft apartment to get me for something. It was late in the afternoon, and no one had seen me yet that day. He knocked and yelled and banged on the door, but I couldn't be roused, though the bedroom was just inside the entrance. He said he walked away thinking I might be dead. After the anniversary party, he packed up

his family and took them away—to get away from me and the pain of watching his older brother collapsing. And he took precious Lewella, my niece, with him.

“We just can’t be around you anymore,” he told me as they rolled off down the dirt road in their beat-up little teal Saturn sedan.

That first four-night run had been in mid-December, and, trying to control myself, I’d left part of my huge cocaine stash in the basement of my grandmother’s house in Lexington. It worked to keep me sober for a day or two, a little bit of reality seeping back into my brain. But on Christmas Eve, the insanity descended again. After the family’s evening celebrations were complete, I hopped in my Dodge Dakota truck and drove three hours down to get the blow. There were few people on the road that night, but I hardly noticed anything, the tunnel vision of addiction honed to near completeness. As soon as I saw the white bricks I ripped one open and went to work with a knife and a razor. I sucked down a big line from the back of a cd case and the familiar sour and pungent flavor dripped down my nasals. Ah, I sighed and stood up, and all the driving became worth it.

Before I left, I made up a batch of freebased cocaine in the basement, my own little white Christmas celebration. I took off from Lexington around midnight and drove the whole way back, about three hours. I felt cocaine rushing through my body in all the right places. There were Christmas songs on the radio and I sang along with Bing Crosby and the rest of them with the windows open, doing seventy up route 128, north of Boston. I brought a little pipe with me and conducted the ritual of smoking cocaine while underway, closing the windows and carefully shaking some cigarette ash from my Altoids tray into my pipe, and topping it with freebase crystals--lighting it up with my

trusty miniature Bic with the red alligator skin case. Large lighters felt too bulky, and the tiny ones were too dainty for my large hands. A small Bic with a case on it was the perfect size.

It took me many months of hard sobriety work before I could see an ash dangling off a cigarette and not feel the beginnings of an irresistible urge to smoke cocaine. An urge is one thing, but for me it was an insidious feeling of inevitability, like I had no say in the matter. But my sobriety journey didn't start until New Years' Eve, and it was only Christmas Eve, after all.

Of course, I didn't sleep a bit that night before Christmas, showing up for present opening celebrations weary but high. I wasn't to stop there though. I stayed up the next night too, and the one after that, and the one after that, so that by the evening of the 28th and my parent's anniversary celebration, I'd been up for four nights and five days, sucking down two ounces of blow by myself during that span, or 56 grams, one gram being normally sufficient for one user to have a great night.

On one of those final nights alone and smoking crack in the sail loft apartment, there was a strange tinge in my chest, and the terrifying sensation that my heart had stopped. I'd just taken a big inhale of crack, and as the buzz of it spread over my body the pounding in my chest suddenly ceased. Dread gripped me, the strongest sensation I'd felt in days. I sat up quickly and smacked my rib cage with my fist. After a couple of the longest seconds in my life my heart started pounding again. I don't remember how many pain killers or Valium I'd took into my body that night, but there were plenty—and plenty of booze too. And endless chains of American Spirit cigarettes for good measure.

And so it was that I showed up to the anniversary party and passed out in the middle of the slide show. There were pictures of my parents getting married in the living room of my grandmother's house in Lexington, and of their early days on the peninsula in Maine living in a tent--Ernie with his pet racoon. I'm not sure I had the capacity to feel shame at that point, having been up for too many hours. I'm having a hard time digging in to the memory past that heavy fog that was upon me. What did I feel when they had to wake me up? Did I realize that shame was the fitting emotion?

Soon after the party I retreated to the sail loft, passed out, and slept until the late afternoon of the 29th. I awoke to the sound of my parents knocking at the door. And that's the tender image of my father. He had hobbled up the ramp and two flights of stairs in his cast and crutches, the cloud of mortality hanging around him, to find his skinny bones of a son still asleep at 4 pm. I don't remember what we talked about exactly, but it was a sort of intervention, albeit an adult version with lots of you-can-do-whatever-you-want-at-this-point-in-your-life themes. In response to the pain and utter lowness of my position, I did what any good addict would do: I got in my truck and ran, headed for Boston and another bag of coke.

I had big notions of heading to New York City to a New Year's Eve celebration. I needed a big plan to buoy me, and what bigger than NYC and New Year's Eve? I had friends down there and knew I could find a place to crash, but the logistics of the venture weren't ever really considered. It was more of an idea, a conjured oasis to give some extra boost to the delusion of having something to do other than cocaine.

I never made it to that party. Instead, I spent December 31st, 2008 in rehab. The night of the 29th, I scored another ounce of blow, trading it for my last remnants of hash. I

had my Valium; I had my pain killers; I had a selection of the best craft beers; I had my cigarettes; I had bubble hash. I surrounded myself with my music equipment, recording gear, cool instruments, and I settled into the basement of my grandmother's house outside in Lexington. And then...nothing. There was nothing left. No spark presented itself. And I had everything right in front of me. I even called the dealer to complain. It was the same stuff as always, but the nose and lungs and brain it was going up into had changed, had numbed out completely. I did thirteen grams that night and nothing happened. One person can have a hell of a night on one gram. The coke was pulsing my blood and heart because I stayed up, but my spirit was worn so thin there was no life left in it to be chemically prodded. And it was in having everything around me that I wanted, without the spark, that I felt the true low of my low.

Bibliography

- Beckman, Joshua. *Shake*. Wave Books, 2006.
- Belieu, Erin. *Slant Six*. Copper Canyon Press, 2015.
- Birkerts, Sven P. *The Art of Time in Memoir: Then, Again*. Graywolf Press, 2008.
- Broder, Melissa. *So Sad Today*. Scribe, 2018.
- Bynum, Sarah Shun-Lien. *Ms. Hempel Chronicles*. F.A. Thorpe, 2011.
- Curtis, Rebecca. *Twenty Grand: and Other Tales of Love and Money*. Harper Perennial, 2007.
- D'Ambrosio, Charles. *Loitering: New & Collected Essays*. Text Publishing Company, 2015.
- Díaz Junot. *Drown*. Reclam, 2016.
- Dostoevsky, Fyodor. *Brothers Karamazov*. Suzeteo Enterprises, 2018.
- . *Crime and Punishment*. Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Duncan, David James. *The Brothers K*. Dial Press, 1992.
- . *River Why*. SIERRA, 1982.
- Durham, David Anthony. *Hannibal: Pride of Carthage*. Bantam Books, 2005.
- Dylan, Bob. *Bob Dylan Chronicles*. Simon & Schuster, 2004.
- Flynn, Nick. *Another Bullshit Night in Suck City*. Faber & Faber, 2016.
- Ford, Adam. *The Road by Cormac McCarthy: Notes*. CAE Book Groups, 2007.
- Frost, Robert. *Complete Poems of Robert Frost*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967.
- Hamburger, Aaron. *The View from Stalin's Head: Stories*. Random House Trade Paperbacks, 2004.

- Hayes, Terrance. *How to Be Drawn*. Penguin Books, 2015.
- Jackson, Major. *Hoops: Poems*. W.W. Norton & Company, 2007.
- Johnson, Denis. *Jesus' Son*. Harper Collins, 1992.
- . *The Throne of the Third Heaven of the Nations Millennium General Assembly: Poems Collected and New*. HarperCollins, 2001.
- Karr, Mary, and Lena Dunham. *The Liars' Club: a Memoir*. Picador, 2015.
- Lahiri, Jhumpa. *The Namesake*. Pascal Press, 2009.
- Limón Ada. *Bright Dead Things: Poems*. Milkweed Editions, 2015.
- Nabokov, Vladimir Vladimirovich. *Speak, Memory: a Memoir*. 1951.
- Prose, Francine. *Reading like a Writer: a Guide for People Who Love Books and for Those Who Want to Write Them*. Union Books, 2012.
- Proust, Marcel. *Remembrance of Things Past*. Wordsworth Editions, 2006.
- Say, Allen. *Drawing from Memory*. Scholastic Press, 2011.
- Schacter, Daniel L. *The Seven Sins of Memory: How the Mind Forgets and Remembers*. W. Ross MacDonald School Resource Services Library, 2009.
- Sebold, Alice, and Odile Demange. *Lucky*. J'ai Lu, 2006.
- Svalina, Mathias. *Wastoid*. Big Lucks Books, 2014.
- Tolstoy, Leo, and Hans Boland. *Anna Karenina*. Athenaeum-Polak & Van Gennepe, 2017.
- . *Tolstoy Short Stories*. Arcturus Publishing Company, 2018.
- Wordsworth, William, et al. *Lyrical Ballads: 1798*. Oxford Univ. Press, 1996.